



Shabbat Rituals and Traditions on Your Campus¹

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Many college campuses hold different Friday night Shabbat services for each of the different Jewish denominations. Some campuses have a community Shabbat dinner, often conducted by the greater Hillel community. Many of the rituals performed at a dinner (and some during services) like this can seem confusing to someone new to the game. Such a situation can prove to be quite overwhelming, so we have created the following guide to help answer some of your questions. By becoming more familiar with these rituals, you will become more comfortable with those observing them. It is likely that your campus community will have its own traditions and by following the *minhag hamakom*, or the tradition of the place you are in, rituals that are new to you now will become your own. Of course, you must make your own decisions as to which rituals are meaningful to you. **This guide is meant only to explain, not to determine, Shabbat practices.**²

Lighting Shabbat Candles:

We usually light **two Shabbat candles** traditionally associated with the two commands to “remember” *and* “guard” the Sabbath, as it appears in the two versions of the Decalogue. This role traditionally falls to a woman, although a man may be given the honor as well. The Shabbat candles will not be moved or touched after they are lit until Shabbat has ended because they are part of what is called *muktzah*, meaning “set aside.” Jews are *halachically* (through Jewish law) restricted from associating with *muktzah* on Shabbat.

How to:

Traditionally, two white candles are lit at sundown on Shabbat by a woman. She lights the candles and then makes three sweeping motions with her hands, covering her eyes, and reciting the blessing over the candles. This motion symbolizes the desire to draw in the spirituality and holiness of Shabbat. **It is also incumbent upon men to ensure that candles are lit, so if you are single and male, feel free to light!**

Shalom Aleichem:

This is the song that begins the Friday night meal. In it, we ask God to bless our homes and communities with peace and serenity. We are taught that Shabbat is 1/60 of the Messianic age, “*Me’ein Olam Haba,*” (*Brachot 57b*) and that we celebrate Shabbat as if we have already reached that glorious time. For the day of peace which symbolizes the era of peace, we sing of peace.

Eishet Chayil:

This song is commonly referred to in English as “Woman of Valor.” It comes from Proverbs 31:10-31, an alphabetical acrostic, and sings the praises of all Jewish women. Husband traditionally sing to their wives, or, as is the case on many campuses, communities sing it in honor of all Jewish women and their dedication to being good people. In some more liberal communities, women sing a different song to their husbands.

Friday Night Kiddush:

¹ Various selections adapted from Friday Night and Beyond: The Shabbat Experience Step-by-Step, by Lori Palatnik, Jason Aronson Inc., 1994.

² Portions in this Comic Sans font were added by Rabbi Jonathan Klein



Kiddush is typically said over wine. It is a ritual that sanctifies Shabbat. Wine in our tradition symbolizes joy and holiness and is used to mark both the beginning and end of Shabbat. When we say *Kiddush*, we recall both creation and our Exodus from Egypt as the prayer reminds us. When freed from Egyptian tyranny, our sense of peoplehood was created.

How to:

A *Kiddush* cup, often ornate and made of silver to further make Shabbat special, is filled with at least 4 and a half oz. of wine or grape juice. The leader recites *Kiddush*, while keeping those present in mind, thus fulfilling the *mitzvah*, or ritual obligation, for the community. One voice is supposed to be heard throughout the blessing, so don't be surprised when the community only joins in with "Amen" at the end. Some choose to stand, while others sit. If you do not already have a *minhag* (tradition), follow those around you! After the leader recites *Kiddush*, he or she will drink most of the "fruit of the vine" from the overflowing cup. At a large community dinner, it is likely that each student will have his or her own small cup of wine and will drink it at this point.

Washing for Bread:

After *Kiddush*, some people may get up from the table to "go wash." We are taught that the washing of the hands was an important ritual before one entered the Temple in Jerusalem. Now that there is no Temple, we strive to make every place around us as holy as that space was. When the walls of the Temple fell, the contained holiness of Judaism spread to the entire world and so we strive to act in a way that retains this sanctity. By saying blessings and washing to achieve a sense of ritual purity, we make the space around us and our actions holy.

How to:

As always, you can ask someone near you that is going to wash if you can accompany them so they can show you exactly what they do. **Here is one way to perform the washing, observed by some:** First, you take the cup in your right hand and fill it with water from the pitcher or tap provided. Then, you pass the cup to your left hand and pour water over your right hand first. Switch hands and pour the water over your left hand. Repeat this hand-switching action two more times for a total of three times that you have poured water over each hand. Then, you raise your hands in front of you, letting the water drip onto your wrists and say the blessing. We lift our hands in this way because the blessing literally translates as "the raising up of the hands." This is done both spiritually and physically by the individual.

Hamotzi – The Blessing Over Bread:

Those who have washed will now return to the table in silence, since we washed in order to eat bread and traditionally, one does not interrupt between a blessing and the action for which the blessing was made. This silence helps us to retain the holiness of the moment before the meal. The translation for the *Hamotzi*, the blessing over the two *Challot*, blesses God who brings forth bread from the earth. Making bread is a long process that results in our life-sustaining food. We are not merely thankful for God's creation of bread, but for all the many steps that go into such a process.

How to:

On Shabbat, we use two *challot* to symbolize the double portion of manna given to our people in the desert after we were freed from Egypt. It would have been a form of work if the Israelites had to collect manna from the ground as they did on other days, so on Friday God delivered to them a double portion. We remember God's kindness by preserving the tradition of having two *challot* on Shabbat. We cover the bread until we are ready to say *Hamotzi*. This ritual has many different stories connected to it; some say the *challah* cover represents the dew that fell on the manna in the desert, while others say it is to not embarrass the *challah* by saying the *Kiddush* first. One pours salt on the bread before eating it just as the meat in the Temple was salted on the altar. A piece of the *challah* is then passed around to everyone at the table. After it is eaten, the meal begins.

Zemirot – Songs for Shabbat:



Singing is a great way to celebrate and observe the beauty of Shabbat. There are lots of different songs with catchy tunes that are sung after or during the meal. These songs are meant to praise God, sing of peace and love, and to generally have fun. The Reform Movement is known to do this with its energetic song sessions.

***Birkat Hamazon* – Grace After the Meal:**

By saying *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing over sustenance, we show God that we understand how precious food is and how blessed we are to have such a wonderful meal. On Shabbat and on holidays, *Birkat Hamazon* is preceded by *Shir Hamaalot*, from psalm 137, about the Jewish people's return from exile. With a great appreciation for God as the source of all that sustains us, we say *Birkat Hamazon*, commonly called *bentching* (Yiddish), as a community.

How to:

Birkat Hamazon in the Reform tradition is usually quite a bit shorter than the traditional blessing. To learn it in its entirety, listen carefully to the community when they *bentch* and read the words along with them. You can also read the English to understand all the various parts. The tune is catchy and, again, someone in your community would probably be happy to teach you how to *bentch*. Certain portions of *Birkat Hamazon* are usually excluded from Reform rite due to theological assertions which most Reform and Conservative Jews reject.

