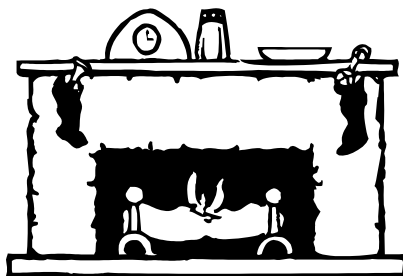


## *Festival of Lights*

The return of the light is the most prominent feature of most midwinter festivals. By lighting lights in the darkness, we celebrate the birth of the sun, stimulate the growing strength of the light and illuminate the darkness.

### *Christmas Candle*

The Christmas candle was once a popular part of the Christmas tradition in Great Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia. A large candle, usually red or some other bright color, it was decorated with holly or other evergreens. One person, usually the eldest or the head of the household, is designated as the light-bringer. She lit the candle for the first time on Christmas Eve before the festive supper and during each of the remaining evenings of the Twelve Days of Christmas. To extinguish the candle, after the meal or at bedtime, she snuffed it with tongs rather than blowing it out, since that would blow the luck away. The candle shed a blessing on the household and so its light was protected from accidental quenching. It seems likely that the candle also represented the coming year, just as the weather of each of the twelve days of Christmas foretells the weather of the corresponding month. It had protective or fertilizing powers and was kept as a charm. In Denmark, during a lightning storm, the remnant would be brought out and lit to protect the household.



### *Yule Log*

Similar customs once surrounded the Yule log. The Yule log must never be bought but should be received as a gift, found or taken from your own property. Often the log to be burned at midwinter is chosen early in the year and set aside.

Tradition varies about the type of wood to be used. Oak logs were popular in the north of England, birch in Scotland and ash in Cornwall and Devon. Ash is the only wood that burns freely when green and the world-tree, Yggdrasil, in the Nordic tradition was an ash-tree. It is important to choose the biggest and greenest log for the Yule log since the Christmas festivities will last only as long as the Yule log burns.

In some parts of the Scottish highlands, the head of the household finds a withered stump and carves it into the likeness of an old woman, the *Cailleach Nollaich* or Christmas Old Wife, a sinister being representing the evils of winter and death. She's the goddess of winter, the hag of night, the old one who brings death. Burning her drives away the winter and protects the occupants of the household from death.

The Yule log is first brought into the house with great ceremony on Christmas Eve (or the eve of solstice, if one prefers), decorated with holly and ivy and other evergreens. Some people prefer to use the Yule log as a decoration and place candles on it instead, thus transforming it into a candelabra, like the menorah or the kinara. It is lit with a piece of last year's log as described in Herrick's poem, "Hesperides:"

Come bring with a noise  
My merry, merry boys  
The Christmas log to the firing  
With the last year's brand.  
Light the new block,  
And for good success in his spending  
On your psalteries play:  
That sweet luck may  
Come while the log is a-teendling.

In Italy, the Yule log is called the *Ceppo*. Boccaccio in the fourteenth century described a Florentine family gathering about the hearth and pouring a libation of wine upon the glowing wood, then sharing the remaining wine, thus linking the Yule log with the custom of wassailing, pouring out libations to the trees in the orchard.

The Yule log is left to burn all night, and, if possible, through the next twelve without going out, although it may be extinguished with water. It is treated with great respect. No one touches it with dirty hands and, in medieval England, people who passed touched their hats to it. The ashes are kept for good luck. They have magical properties and can be scattered in the field to fertilize the soil or sprinkled around the house for protection.



### *Lighting the Menorah*

The traditional menorah has eight lights in a row with none higher than the other. Since the lights are not to be used for any practical purpose, it became customary to add a ninth candle, a *shammas* or *shammash*, which is often set above the others and used to light them. The candles are lit as soon as possible after the stars come out each evening and are left to burn for a half an hour.

On the first night, one candle is put into the menorah, on the far right, and the *shammas* is lit. Three blessings are said before the *shammas* is used to light the candle. The blessings acknowledge the Lord God, who commands us to light candles for Hanukkah, who worked miracles for our ancestors in this season, who has given us life, lifted us up and brought us to this season. Unlike other Jewish traditions, women are also obligated to light Hanukkah candles. In some households, there is a separate menorah for each family member. The menorah should be placed in an outside window so it can be seen from outside, although if this is dangerous, it can be placed on a table in the room.

After the candles are lit, several songs are sung, including this one:

We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, the wonders, the liberations, and the battles that You carried out for our forbears in these days at this time of year, through the hands of Your holy priests. For all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are holy. We are not allowed to use them; they are only to look at, in order to thank and praise your great Name on account of Your miracles, Your wonders, and Your liberations. [Waskow, p. 95]