



The Custom of Nittel

For the year 5785

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The customs of *Nittel* were not recorded in writing by the earlier *Poskim* due to fear of retaliation from their local government and populace. Instead, these customs were transmitted verbally, from generation to generation.

Shulchan Oruch (O.C. 580) lists the days on which some are accustomed to fast. Among them is the "Ninth of *Teves*," about which it states, "it is unknown what calamity occurred on it." Some maintain that this was the day of *Ezra HaSofer's* passing. However, others associate this fast with *Nittel*, maintaining that the background of this fast was deliberately obscured in *Shulchan Oruch* for fear of government censors.

FROM HAYOM YOM (17 TEVES)

The *Rebbe Rashab* explained that *Torah* is not studied on *Nittel-nacht* in order not to "add vitality." [The *Torah* is the source of all existence. Therefore, it is not studied on *Nittel* so as not to add any vitality to those who follow in the ways of "that individual".]

The *Rebbe Rashab* once said: "I am not fond of those diligent students who begrudge these eight hours and cannot tear themselves away from study."

The restriction to study begins at evening (8:43pm) and ends at Halachic midnight (1:20am).

MORE REASONS FOR NITTEL

The *Achronim* provide more reasons for the observance of *Nittel*:

- In times bygone, it was dangerous for Jews to be out in the streets on *Nittel*, or to have lights burning in their homes.
- Halacha* mandates mourning for a relative who leaves the Jewish fold. Since a mourner may not study *Torah*, it is likewise not studied on *Nittel*.
- Torah* is not studied because "that individual" no longer has any association with *Torah*, unlike any other Jew.
- Torah* is not studied in order to emphasize the mistake of "that individual": "Lo *Hamidrash Ikar Ella Hama'ase* (the main thing is not study, but deed)."

THE MEANING OF NITTEL

The name *Nittel* was widely used in the times of the early *Rishonim*.

Several reasons for the name *Nittel*:

- Natal (Latin origin): "born".
- ניטל – His eventual "removal".
- ניתל – His eventual "hanging".

TORAH LEARNING

One should refrain from studying both *Nigleh* and *Chassidus*.

The *Friediker Rebbe* once recounted that the *Rebbe Rashab* did not study *Chassidus* on *Nittel* at all. Even when *Nittel* occurred on Friday night, the *Rebbe Rashab* would deliver his customary Friday night *Maamar* on *Shabbos* morning instead.

One may relate stories of *Tzaddikim*. [For instance, when Rabbi Weinberg's weekly radio *Tanya Shiur* coincided with *Nittel*, the *Rebbe* instructed him to recount *Chassidic* stories instead. Similarly, when a *Pegisha* event occurred on *Nittel*, the *Rebbe* instructed that stories be shared instead.]

A mourner recites *Mishnayos* at the conclusion of *davening*, as usual.

Sephardim generally do not observe the customs of *Nittel*, as the local populace in their countries of origin did not follow the ways of "that individual".

OTHER PRACTICES

The *Rebbe Rashab* was accustomed to playing Chess on *Nittel*, or guiding others who were playing Chess. The *Rebbe* explained (*Vayeshev* 5750) that while *Torah* study was prohibited, the *Rebbe Rashab* used the time to sharpen his mind, enabling him to understand *Torah* better. Furthermore, he created a *Kiddush Hashem* by demonstrating that the *Torah*-observant are highly skilled at playing Chess.

From this, we learn that one should not remain idle on *Nittel*. Rather, one should spend the time productively, such as by stimulating the mind, performing household chores, and/or engaging in *Chessed*. [The *Rebbe* once recounted that a *Yeshivah Bochor* deliberately postponed sewing buttons on his clothing in order to have something constructive to do on *Nittel*.]

On occasion, the *Rebbe* took the opportunity on *Nittel* to watch videos of various *Chabad* activities, or to listen to recordings of *Chassidic Farbrengens*.

A *Sofer* should preferably avoid writing *STA" M* on *Nittel*, even if he is technically not learning. However, printing or

photocopying words of *Torah* is permitted on *Nittel*.

Intimacy should be deferred until after midnight. Ideally, a wedding is not scheduled for *Nittel*.

NAME & TITLES

One may technically refer to "that individual" with his birth name (i.e. first name), but not with the title that follows his first name, which means "anointed one", and is essentially a title of divinity.

One should not refer to *Nittel* with its conventional name, which denotes celebration of divinity or supremacy.

One may not incorporate the conventional name of *Nittel* into greetings or well-wishes. When unavoidable, one may wish "Happy Holidays" or "Happy New Year". Even then, it is preferable to do so at least a day before or after, rather than on the day itself. A *Baal Nefesh* should avoid such greetings entirely. [However, there is no issue at all in wishing "Happy New Year" to someone who neither practices nor identifies with this religion.]



STORIES

A priest mockingly asked Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschutz how the world could possibly continue to exist on *Nittel*, if it is true that all creation is sustained solely by *Torah* study. Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschutz responded that *Minhag Yisroel* is also *Torah*. Thus, the custom to refrain from learning is itself the *Torah* through which the world exists.

The *Maharsha* would utilize *Nittel* to calculate his annual *Maaser* obligations. One year, shortly before *Nittel*, an informant alerted the authorities, claiming that the *Maharsha* showed disdain for their religion by refraining from *Torah* study on *Nittel*. When *Nittel* arrived, and the *Maharsha* was calculating his annual *Maaser*, a *Sefer* suddenly fell from the bookcase. The *Maharsha* rushed to pick it up and return it to its place. When this happened three times in succession, the *Maharsha* decided to open the *Sefer* to look inside. At that precise moment, the informant and police burst through the door, intending to catch the *Maharsha* red-handed. When the raiding party saw the *Maharsha* perusing a *Sefer*, they quickly retreated, and the *Maharsha* was saved.