



The Custom of Nittel

For the year 5784

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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, the various customs were handed down verbally, from generation to generation.

Shulchan Oruch (O.C. 580) lists the days on which some are accustomed to fast. Included in the list: "Ninth of *Teves*; it is unknown what calamity occurred on it." Some maintain that this was the day of *Ezra HaSofer's* passing. However, others connect this fast with *Nittel*; they maintain that the background of this fast was purposefully obscured in *Shulchan Oruch*, for fear of the government censors.

🌀 HAYOM YOM (17 TEVES)

The *Rebbe Rashab* explained that *Torah* is not studied on *Nittel-nacht* in order not to elicit an "increase in life-force." [The *Torah* is the source of all existence. Therefore, *Torah* 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 those eight hours and cannot tear themselves away from study."

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

🌀 MORE REASONS FOR NITTEL

The *Achronim* provide many other reasons for the observance of *Nittel*. These include:

- In times bygone, it was dangerous for a Jew to be out in the streets on *Nittel*, or for lights to burn in Jewish homes.
- Halacha* mandates that one should mourn a relative who leaves the Jewish fold. Since a mourner may not study *Torah*, it is not studied on *Nittel*.
- Torah* is not studied because "that individual" no longer has any association with *Torah*, as opposed to 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* delivered his customary Friday night *Maamar* on *Shabbos* morning instead.

One may recount stories of *Tzaddikim*. [When Rabbi Weinberg's weekly radio *Tanya Shiur* occurred on *Nittel*, the *Rebbe* instructed Rabbi Weinberg to recount *Chassidic* stories instead. Similarly, when a *Pegisha* event occurred on *Nittel*, the *Rebbe* instructed that stories be recounted instead.]

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

Sephardim do not observe the customs of *Nittel*, being that the local populaces in their countries of origin did not follow in 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 even though *Torah* study was prohibited, the *Rebbe Rashab* utilized his time in order to sharpen his mind, which would enable him to understand *Torah* better. Furthermore, he created a *Kiddush Hashem* by showing that the *Torah*-observant are highly skilled at playing Chess.

From this we learn that one should not be idle on the night of *Nittel*, but should rather utilize one's time usefully, such as by stimulating one's mind, or by performing household chores, and/or *Chessed* work. [The *Rebbe* once recounted that a *Yeshivah Bochur* deferred sewing buttons on his clothing in order to have something productive to do on *Nittel*.]

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

It is preferable that a *Sofer* not write *STA"AM* on *Nittel*, even if he is technically not learning. However, one may print or photocopy words of *Torah* on *Nittel*.

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

🌀 NAME USAGE

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 intended as a title of divinity.

Where possible, one should also avoid referring to *Nittel* with the prevalent name, which denotes celebration of divinity or supremacy.



🌀 STORIES

A priest mockingly asked Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschutz how the world could possibly exist on *Nittel*, being that the world exists only due to the study of *Torah*. Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschutz responded that a *Minhag Yisroel* is also *Torah*. Thus, the custom to refrain from learning is itself the *Torah* by which the world exists.

The *Maharsha* would utilize *Nittel* to calculate his annual *Maser* obligations. One year, shortly before *Nittel*, an informant notified the authorities that the *Maharsha* showed his disdain for their religion by refraining from *Torah* study on *Nittel*. When the night of *Nittel* arrived, as the *Maharsha* was making his annual *Maser* calculations, a *Sefer* suddenly fell out of the bookcase, whereupon the *Maharsha* rushed to pick it up from the floor, and return it to its place. When this repeated itself three times, the *Maharsha* opened up the *Sefer* to look inside. At that precise moment, the informant and the police burst through the door, with the intention of catching the *Maharsha* red-handed. When the raiding party saw the *Maharsha* perusing a *Sefer*, they quickly retreated, and the *Maharsha* was saved.