



CHANUKAH 2021

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



Chanukah falls out when it gets dark early on some of the days with the least day light hours the entire year. In addition to lighting the candles, eating latkes and other customs, to me Chanukah represents actively adding light to the world. This Chanukah booklet is our gift to you to help you educate, engage, motivate and inspire your children, students, congregants, family or friends to action this Chanukah.

The topics were selected for their relevance, utility and their connection with Areyvut's work. While designed for Chanukah, this resource can be used throughout the year. We encourage you to revisit this booklet each Chanukah and use it as a tool to reflect, grow and rededicate and commit to actively adding light to the world.

I would like to thank Judith Kuper Jaffe and Rena Ray for their help and efforts in bringing this to fruition.

I encourage you to share this widely with students, congregants, family, friends and colleagues and please share your feedback with us at info@areyvut.org.

Wishing you and yours a Chag Urim Sameach, a festive and joyous Chanukah and continued health, abundant blessing, success and the ability to actively add light to the world daily.

Daniel Rothner
Founder & Director



CHANUKAH

Chanukah is the Jewish eight-day “Festival of Lights” celebrated with a nightly Chanukiyah/Chanukah menorah lighting, special prayers and foods cooked in oil. Chanukah begins on the eve of Kislev 25 and continues for eight days.

In the second century BCE, the Holy Land was ruled by the Seleucids (Syrian-Greeks), who tried to force the people of Israel to accept Greek culture and beliefs instead of mitzvah observance and belief in God. Against all odds, a small band of faithful but poorly armed Jews, led by Judah the Maccabee, defeated one of the mightiest armies on earth, drove the Greeks from the land, reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to the service of God.

According to midrash, when they sought to light the Temple’s Menorah (the seven-branched candelabra), they found only a single cruse of olive oil. Miraculously, they lit the menorah and the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days, until new oil could be prepared. The Talmudic rabbis also explained that the battle lasted three long years and the Jews missed celebrating the 8 day festival of Sukkot. This new festival of Chanukah was created to make up for the celebrations missed.

The Chanukah story has many themes that can form the core of our holiday celebration. Consider using the ones below as opportunities for family discussion as you enjoy the light of Chanukah.

I. POWER AND POWERLESS

Chanukah appears to be the story of the military triumph of the Maccabees and their followers over the much larger and stronger Greek Syrian Seleucid army. Maccabees' revolt was the last military victory our people would celebrate for two millennia. Jews would not even have a standing army after the dispersion from the land of Israel in the year 70 CE until the twentieth century. And yet the Jewish people survived and thrived.

Judaism and the Jewish people left Israel shortly after the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, and the people were dispersed. They maintained their connection to God by carrying the robust legacy of Torah, Mitzvot, Shabbat and following it wherever they went. They were open to learning new things from new cultures and incorporating them into our understanding of Torah and Mitzvot.

Part of the miracle of Chanukah is that our people faced incredible obstacles - anti-Semitism, poverty, displacement - and still maintained the light of the Jewish people. This ability to bounce back from hard times has its place in every family's history.

The story of the Maccabee triumph is part strength/power and part vulnerability. In standing up for who they were, the Maccabees were celebrating being part of a Jewish people. They were exposed and vulnerable. Most of us think about strength as a physical and spiritual quality. Vulnerability is a necessary component to new learning, and to risk-taking and growth.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. In what ways are Jews powerful and powerless today?
2. What is the power of goodness; the power of doing mitzvot, commandments and the power to touch other human beings?
3. How does this power fit into a larger discussion of power and powerlessness?
4. How can we support the powerless by writing to our governmental leadership?
5. How can we support food shelters?
6. Explore the hardest times your family has faced (wars, economic downturns, family rivalries, disabilities and deaths)
7. How has your family found ways to grow from adversity? What have we learned from these experiences?
8. In preparation for this discussion, collect stories of the Depression, World War II or the Vietnam War to share them with family members.
9. Interview a senior citizen.
10. Select one family member and talk about his/her contribution to your life that you still celebrate.
11. Collect old photographs and add captions to the pictures and share.
12. Make a list of how being vulnerable allows people to get closer to each other.
13. Pirkei Avot says: Who is strong? Someone who can conquer their ego. (4:1) In view of this list, who is really a strong person? Isn't it the one who can also take risks and be vulnerable?
14. In what ways are we strong, and in what ways are we vulnerable? Is strength always strength? Is vulnerability always a weakness?
15. The life of the Jewish people in history is a mixture of strength and vulnerability. Can you attest to some of the times when this mixture came into play in our people's life; in your family's life?
16. Chanukah celebrates the miracle of a small jug of oil lasting for 8 days. As you light your Menorah, ask this question: What "miraculous" events, large or small, do you wish to celebrate this year?

II. LIGHTNESS AND DARKNESS

The Chanukah story celebrates miracles. The light that lasted eight days when it should have lasted one is just one type of miracle. The few and weak defeated the strong and mighty. Consider that Chanukah, the miracle of light, is celebrated in the season of darkness. The miracle is not only that the light lasted for eight days; it has lasted for two millennia.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. What are the miracles that we celebrate today?
2. How are they testimonies to the experience of God in the universe?
3. What light do we celebrate? What darkness do we face?
4. Consider your family's blessings. Discuss them.
5. List the challenges your family faces. Develop a vision for the next year by asking everyone to share what they would like to see more of in their lives.
6. Brainstorm some dark "positives." Consider when we close our eyes to sleep (and it works better in the dark). We need that in our daily cycle.
7. Chanukah celebrates the miracle of a small jug of oil lasting for 8 days. As you light your Menorah, ask this question: What "miraculous" events, large or small, do you wish to celebrate this year?
8. What is a miracle? How many miracles can you find in every day? Can you think of some miracles you've heard in the news or in your family or from people you know?
9. Apparently, we did not always have the miracle of the oil story - it developed somewhat later. Why then do we need such stories? Why do people need miracles?
10. Miracles have a connection to hope. Does a miracle involve simple faith in G-d?
11. What does it mean to "fight against the odds", especially overwhelming ones, like the Maccabees?

III. LET THERE BE LIGHT

In Bereshit 1:3, God Said "Let There Be Light" - Vayehi or - Let there be light ...right in the beginning of Genesis. And here we have Chag Ha-Urim! - this chag all about light, about rededicating ourselves, removing impurities so-to-speak, recreating anew, and making sure to shine light outwards to every passer-by.

Or A light in the long wintry darkness...

Light has its own purity, light can be warm, light can be harsh, light can give hope, light can remind, light can inform...

Often, we limit the possible concepts here only to light and darkness as equating to good and evil, being informed versus being ignorant, presence versus absence. Light and darkness need each other. You wouldn't see the light without the darkness.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Discuss what our Chanukah lights express to you?
2. What are we trying to proclaim to that passer-by on the street?
3. What sort of troubling issues in the world (or in your area) do we need to shine a light on these days and address?
4. More generally, what might the Chanukah light represent, literally and/or symbolically?
5. Consider writing a few short lines, poems, or creating a collage.
6. Encourage your family to share something positive each night at candle lighting - "share a little light."

IV. A TIME OF GIFT-GIVING

Chanukah is a time of gift-giving now. Previously, the gifts were primarily gelt," small amounts of coins or chocolate, used to gamble in the dreidel game. Now, in America, Chanukah has become a time of major gift-giving.

All children and adults have talents. They may not view these as gifts to share but consider developing a list of these gifts and try to foster a spirit of sharing them as gift-giving in your family. It might even be fun to write down gifts of service on pieces of paper and draw them out of a hat.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. What are our individual gifts (talents)?
2. What gifts of service could we give to each other and to our community at this time of year?
3. Discuss the value of exchanging these gifts
4. What is a gift? How do we feel when we get gifts? How do we feel when we give gifts?
5. Can a gift be an action? Share an experience of being helped or treated kindly. How did this make you feel?
6. Consider tzedakah in lieu of seasonal gift-giving.

V. JEWISH IDENTITY; ASSIMILATION AND FREEDOM

The story of the Maccabees offer testimony to the Jewish people's unwillingness to stop being who they are - Jewish. When Judah Maccabee refuses to offer a pig as a sacrifice to a Greek god, he is proclaiming a different standard of identity.

Chanukah is traditionally a minor religious festival. Certainly, it has increased in popular recognition and broader participation because of our greater exposure and integration in Christian countries, given the proximity of Christmas. This creates both problems and opportunities. There is some irony. A holiday which began as assimilationists pitted against traditionalists, under the original semi-autonomy framework of Alexander's empire is now affected by greater exposure and integration in Christian countries.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Freedom carries responsibility and likely some price, whichever way one chooses in identity - ties and their expression. Discuss that responsibility vis a vis assimilation.
2. Where is the balance for you personally between your Jewish identity and integration into the larger society? Where do you actually draw the line and why?
3. What does being Jewish mean to you? What do you think it meant to the Maccabees? What was Judah fighting for? Does that fight resonate today?
4. What do you think being Hellenized meant then and why was that a problem?
5. What do you find most concerning about the approaching holiday season? What makes you most uncomfortable? If you were interviewed on a news program, what would you want to discuss?
6. What can we each do to lessen such concerns while still keeping to our own identity, traditions and their Jewish expression?
7. Contrast the Maccabees with the example of Marrano Jews practicing in secret. Which is right, if at all, and when?
8. Discuss specific values unique, special, positive in being Jewish.
9. Discuss the qualities you are proudest of?
10. What are we proudest of in the accomplishments of our people?

VI. A SENSORY HOLIDAY

Imagine Chanukah as a sensory holiday - full of lights, smells, tastes, motion, music - creating warm feelings and building important memories and attachments.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Explore Chanukah through your senses intentionally. How does that make you feel? Smell the oil. Taste the latkes or sufganiyot. Hear the dreidel spin. See the lights. Brainstorm other examples.
2. Experience the limits of oil sufficient for one day and the feeling of it lasted.

VII. ISRAEL AND IDENTITY

Review the Maccabees fighting, winning back the Holy Temple, and then ruling an autonomous state. Contrast that highlights of history to the establishment of the modern state of Israel, about two thousand years later.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. In the intervening years, Judaism and Jews were forced to evolve to a more portable and transferrable Jewish identity. Discuss what this meant and means today.
2. What has been more successful and less successful at maintaining our identity? In Israel, certain things are “easier” because Judaism is all around - culturally, religiously, historically, archeologically, philosophically.
3. Ivrit/Hebrew, a Jewish language, which is infused with all those aspects, and how a culture and people, in effect, “thinks”. That can be a powerful “identity glue,” even with the large secular portion of our population, and a helpful integration vehicle for the many Jews who return to live here from disparate cultures. Discuss what can be harnessed from the Israeli experience in the more “portable identity” today.
4. Discuss the miracle of Israel. What does it mean to have an Israel, after 2,000 years, and why.
5. How does Israel figure into Jewish identity elsewhere?
6. How hard it is for Israel to exist in this world and why it is so necessary (you can also use the opportunity to discuss various peace options if so inclined).
7. Chanukah is really a time to take a second look at the “wow” of this part of our history and heritage, to appreciate Israel’s existence and foster more interest, ties, and interchange between our communities – even on a very basic level with young children. This might be an opportunity to foster those connections by writing cards to the Friends of Israel Defense Forces or Lone Soldiers.

VIII. GREEN CHANUKAH

Our ancestors had to carefully conserve resources and creatively recycle through a long revolt and in other historically hard times. The miracle of one day’s oil lasting eight days tells us something no less pertinent today – environmentally. Chanukah can also mean shining a light on how we take care of our world and all of G-d’s creations.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Discuss what you can do to make a Green Chanukah, and maybe carry it further through the year.
2. Chanukah is also a reminder of beating great odds, and we think that surely applies to working for the environment too, and incremental “wins” that we have in fact seen.
3. What kind of things might be more environmental concerns in winter and what can we do about them?
4. Brainstorming decoration and gift-giving, from a perspective of what is environmentally friendlier.

IX. WHAT DOES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REALLY MEAN?

Freedom has a price and requires weighing and serious decisions sometimes. At times, one person's freedom may infringe on another's in certain ways and times.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. What does "separation of church and state" mean?
2. Is there an issue of religious freedom involved in public displays on religious holidays, where tax money is spent for them?
3. In some countries/areas/communities wearing certain garments or symbols is religiously dictated and enforced. In other places, these same things are being legislated against. How do you feel about such matters?
4. If a school or institution has a time of public prayer, how does one feel about that and what would one do, and/or what kind of stance would one take? If an amendment passed requiring school prayer and or Bible study, do you feel this crosses a line, and what would you do in such a case?
5. The language we choose has implicit messages. What is the distinction between "tolerating" something different and "appreciating" something different? Discuss a "tolerant" society versus an "inclusive" society?"
6. Here are some examples of religious belief that I think are more important (or central). These are worth taking a real stand and action on"
7. Discuss personal autonomy. For years, people believe what they do is their business. Now we have a pandemic. Individuals' decisions affect others. Wearing a mask and getting a vaccination are two examples. Does freedom have limits? Does the opposite of freedom (laws) have freedom?

X. RE-DEDICATION

Chanukah is a holiday of re-dedication, a festival celebrating the re-establishment of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem by the Maccabees.

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS AND/OR ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Is there something in your life that you want to improve or to which you want to rededicate yourself this season?
2. Chanukah celebrates the victory of the underdogs, Judah the Maccabee and his band of rebels, over the great Syrian Greek army. What is an example of an underdog victory that makes you proud?
3. Judith was a heroine whose bravery and ingenuity helped save the Jewish people. Who are some female heroes in your life? What great women leaders do you admire? Why?
4. Chanukah has become a major gift-giving holiday. Sometimes, we focus too much attention on giving and receiving lavish gifts. Can you think of a way to share this holiday that might make a real difference to the lives of your family, friends, neighbors, or to strangers?
5. As we light the Menorah and recall the Miracle of the Oil, we have an opportunity to think carefully about the precious and limited natural resources of our planet. What is one practical action you can take to help preserve or re-new the great "temple" that is our planet by making the most of limited resources?
6. The dreidel and the Menorah are both important Chanukah traditions. While our ancestors played the dreidel to protect their hidden study of Torah, we are instructed to play openly and display the Menorah for all to see. What is something you are proud of in your life? To whom do you share it? How do you share it?
7. On Chanukah, the light of our Menorahs burn brightly with all of the candles aglow. According to tradition, we are not supposed to use the light of the Menorah for reading, studying, or work. We are supposed to simply enjoy its wondrous light. What would you like to think about or discuss as you enjoy the beautiful light of the Menorah with your loved ones?