

# CHANUKAH CELEBRATES FREEDOM, STRENGTH & SURVIVAL

Chanukah, also called the Festival of Lights is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the victory of the Jewish people over the Greeks. Chanukah celebrates freedom, strength and survival against the odds. The Jews were forced to give up their religious freedoms because the Syrian King, Antiochus, wanted everyone to practice one religion, and the Maccabees fought for their right to practice Judaism. Part of the miracle of Chanukah is that the Jewish nation faced incredible obstacles (anti-semitism, poverty, displacement) and still maintained the light of the Jewish people. In Jewish history, we have had this special ability to “bounce back” from hard times.

## Questions

- What does religious freedom really mean?
- What are the hardest times your family have faced?
- How has your family found ways to grow from adversity?
- What is an obstacle in your life that you were able to bounce back from?
- What have you learned from these experiences?





# THE SEARCH FOR LIGHT IN DARK TIMES - A LITTLE LIGHT DISPELS MUCH DARKNESS

The Menorah is a symbol of triumph of freedom over oppression, of spirit over matter, and of light over darkness in the physical and spiritual realms. The miracle of light is celebrated in a season of darkness, when the days are the shortest and the nights are the longest. It is precisely into this darkest window of time that we begin to light our own lights, to dispel the darkness. We are often overwhelmed by the amount of darkness in our world, particularly now with the events taking place in Israel. With every Chanukah candle we light, we illumine the most important message of all. No matter how dark the world may feel right now, our celebration of Chanukah teaches there is always a possibility of hope and of bringing light into the world. Increasing light in a dark time can enhance our joy and happiness. May the candles inspire us to do our part to add more light in the world through more deeds of kindness, charity and love.

## Questions

- What light do we celebrate? What are the blessings in your life?
- What might light represent, literally and/or symbolically?
- What do you think our Chanukah lights are "saying"? What are we trying to proclaim to that passer-by on the street?
- How do the Chanukah candles inspire you to be constantly striving upward?
- What darkness do we face? List the challenges your family deal with?
- On a global scale, what sort of troubling issues do we need to shine a light on these days and address?
- With so many problems, how can one person change the nature of the world?
- Can darkness coexist with light? Do they need each other?
- How can we find the light in dark times?
- The more we illuminate the world with acts of goodness and kindness, the more we keep out hatred. What acts of kindness have you done recently for others?
- What would you like to see more of in your life in the coming year?



# CELEBRATING THE MIRACLE OF LIGHT IN OUR LIVES

The Chanukah story celebrates miracles. The word miracle means a great event that exceeds all natural and human powers happened, possibly caused by divine intervention. We all have to believe that a miracle can happen in order for it to take place. A miracle is one part faith and one part divinity. The light that lasted eight days when it should have lasted one is just one type of miracle. This unprecedented time calls for miracles, so let's light our Chanukah candles and direct our hope towards the miracles that will restore world peace and unite all of the Jews.

## Questions

- What is a miracle? What are the miracles that we celebrate?
- How many miracles can you find on a daily basis?
- Can you think of some miracles you have heard in the news or in your family or from people you know?
- What miraculous events, large or small, do you wish to celebrate this year?
- What does it mean to "fight against the odds", especially overwhelming ones, like the Maccabees?





# GIFTS AND GIFT GIVING

Chanukah is a time of gift giving. In these dark times, “giving” means so much more than presents. Chanukah is an ideal time to think of the people and places that have made a difference in our lives, and show our support in whatever ways can. We can provide financial support as well as give of our time and energy. We are all created in the image of G-d and all have unique talents. We may not view these as gifts to share.

## Questions

- How do we feel when we get gifts? How do we feel when we give gifts?
- What are your individual gifts? Make a list of these gifts to encourage gift giving in your family.
- What gifts could we give to each other and to our community at this time of year?
- 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?
- Why do you think so many people today don't believe in miracles?
- Share an experience of being helped or treated kindly and how it made you feel, and also one of helping or being kind to someone and how that made you feel.





# FEAR AND HOPE

The Chanukah story tells how the Maccabees were greatly outnumbered by King Antiochus's army. And yet, the Maccabees had great spirit; they never lost sight of their goals; and, ultimately, they were successful in defeating their enemies. The story of Hanukkah celebrates the triumph of vision over fear. Let us hope together to be able to celebrate future joyous occasions.

## Questions

- What do we fear?
- How can fear be an obstacle in our lives?
- How can we keep from making fear a general principle of living?
- What visions of our lives would represent the triumph of vision over fear?
- What makes you hopeful in dark times? Have you ever struggled to feel hopeful?
- Have you experienced a personal or collective sense of hope in action?
- What are you hopeful about in the coming year?





# THE PRIDE OF CELEBRATING WHO WE ARE

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

## Questions

- What do you like about being Jewish? What does being Jewish mean to you? What did it mean to the Maccabees? What was Judah fighting for?
- What is unique and special about being Jewish?
- Where is the balance for you personally between your Jewish identity and integration into the larger society? Where do you draw the line and why?
- What qualities in ourselves are we proudest of? What are we proudest of in the accomplishments of our people?
- How hard it is for Israel to exist in this world and why it is so necessary?





# LEADERSHIP

On Chanukah, we use a special candle called the shamash to light the rest of the candles on our Chanukiah. Our shamash candle teaches us that we can be a leader, guiding others into renewed light. Just as Judah the Maccabee led his people to victory, we, too, can be an example of bravery and goodness in our own lives. In fact, leadership often means being the first to do something, or doing the right thing regardless of who follows.

We “ignite” or “spark” ourselves to be better and better, and to pass that on, like the little lone shamash, lighting one candle at a time until there are a whole bunch of candles spreading light everywhere around us, the light overflowing into the street for passers-by as well to pick up the beauty of those lights and their message and pass it forward too.

## Questions

- The shamash oversees the lighting the other candles. He is responsible for the lighting, he is the leader. What does it mean to step into the shamash role as a leader?
- When were you given a position of leadership? How did it make you feel?
- Each of us can be a shamash in our own lives. The middah of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) tells of our responsibility to help uplift and heal our communities and the world. Think about how you care for others. How can you lift them up or support them in something they care about?
- What is one issue facing your community that you would like to get involved with?
- What is one way to search for the good in others?
- If the shamash is filled with self-pride and thinks that his light is the most important light, he has failed in his role. If he is a humble shamash, then all the candles around him will blaze joyously with a grand light. Why is it important to be humble? Share a time you were humble



# CHANUKAH- A FESTIVAL OF RE-DEDICATION

The Chanukah story is also a tale of renewal. Antiochus marched into Jerusalem, vandalized the Temple, erected an idol on its altar, and even slaughtered pigs in order to desecrate the holy space. And yet, when the Maccabees re-entered space, they determined that it was not damaged beyond all hope, but rather, could be reconsecrated for use. This idea of rededication - the possibility of a new beginning - is such a powerful statement, and of course also applies to the "temple" that is each individual. None of us are beyond hope, or damaged beyond repair. Chanukah reminds us that it is always possible to rededicate ourselves to holy purposes and begin anew.

## Questions

- Is there something in your life that you want to improve or to which you want to rededicate yourself this year? How do you plan on rededicating yourself to this in the coming year and how will you stay dedicated?
- How will you rededicate yourself to repairing the world?
- If you had to choose one thing to which you want to rededicate yourself each night of Chanukah, what would these eight things be?
- Why is it important to set goals for yourself?

