



CHANUKAH 2024

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



ANTI-SEMITISM: BELIEF, BEHAVIOR AND BELONGING

Part of the miracle of Chanukah is that our people faced incredible obstacles - anti-Semitism, and assimilation - and still maintained the light of the Jewish people.

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.

Anti-Semitism: the three B's: Belief, Behavior and Belonging

Throughout world history and today, when tyrannical, autocratic or bullying monarchs feel threatened by the three **B's: Belief, Behavior, and Belonging**, they take action. In 168 - 164 BCE, King Antiochus IV Epiphanes outlawed Jewish practices, defiled the Temple, and installed an altar to Zeus. He felt his power was in jeopardy because a small group of people **Believed**, **Behaved**, and **Belonged** differently.

Mattiyahu, the religious leader of the Jews, fled from the center of Judaism in Jerusalem, by the Holy Temple, to the hills of Modi'in. He had five sons: the famous Yehuda and his four brothers, Eliezer, Yonatan, Shimon and Yochanan.

Chanukah is a holiday that celebrates the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, with lessons that may apply to everyone. The Maccabees were liberal warriors who fought against religious oppression and the Chanukah light is a torch that leads the way to preserving religious freedoms.

DISCUSS

1. What other Biblical and historical stories that fall into this framework of the three B's? What do not? How do they differ?
2. What do the following stories have in common: Passover, Purim, Bubonic Plague, Blood Libel? Others?



ASSIMILATION

At the time, Jerusalem was ruled by the Greek Seleucids, ethnic Syrians, who were part of the vast Ancient Greek Empire. The Seleucids tried to impose Greek values on the Jews and pressured them to stop worshipping the monotheistic God and following the tenets of their faith.

The worship of the human body, the philosophers, polytheism and the Olympics were some of the Ancient Greek cultural norms that attracted members of the ancient society. Many Jews went along with this plan as well and assimilated into Ancient Greek culture, which was diametrically against Judaism. A feisty minority refused to comply. Led by Yehuda the Maccabee, these faithful Jews with only primitive weaponry managed to defeat the mightiest empire in the world. They drove the Greeks from the Holy Land, reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to the service of God. Following the miraculous defeat of the Greek-Seleucid Syrians, the Maccabees' toughest battle was to re-educate and de-Hellenize Jews.

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. Here is the irony: a holiday which began as assimilationists pitted against traditionalists, under the original semi-autonomy framework of Greek Seleucid's Empire is now affected by greater exposure and integration in Christian countries.

DISCUSS

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 draw the line and why? Why was this a tough battle? How do we defeat our outside influences?
3. Does this challenge exist today? What can we each do to lessen such concerns while keeping to our own identity, traditions and their Jewish expression?
4. What does being Jewish mean to you? What do you think it meant to the Maccabees? What was Yehuda fighting for? Does that fight resonate today?
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. Contrast the Maccabees with the example of Marrano Jews practicing in secret. Which is right, if at all, and when?
7. Discuss specific values unique, special, positive in being Jewish.
8. Discuss the qualities you are proudest of?
9. What are we proudest of in the accomplishments of our people?



THE MACCABEES

After the family of Mattiyahu, the High Priest (Kohen), fled Jerusalem, they went undercover to protect themselves from the Greek-Syrian Seleucid Empire. They took the secret name “Maccabees” from “Mi chamocho ba’elim,” which translates to “Who is like you among the gods, Lord” in Hebrew. The family took the first letter of each word, creating the acronym MaCaBee.

This phrase is taken from the Exodus story where the Israelites sing about God’s power after crossing the Red Sea. The phrase expresses the idea that God is the only true and powerful deity, and that there is no one comparable to him, making Chanukah a celebration rooted deeply in faith in God.

DISCUSS

1. Why did they choose this name?
2. What did you communicate to the Maccabees’ peers? What should it communicate to us today?



CHANUKAH: THE NAME

Chanukah literally means “dedication” in Hebrew and commemorates the rededication of the Temple after it was defiled by the Greek-Syrian Seleucid Empire in 167 - 164 BCE. It’s fitting that this holiday is called “dedication” because this is a defining theme of the story: When King Antiochus IV Epiphanes forced the Jews to assimilate into Hellenist culture and made observing Judaism a capital offense, the Maccabees refused to accept this decree.

This group of Jewish revolutionaries was so dedicated to Judaism and the freedom to practice it that they launched a revolt against the Greek-Syrian Seleucid superpower. They did this even though they realized that their chances of winning were slim to none. This was their mission, and they were willing to risk everything to carry it out.

Because of their dedication to this cause, and refusal to cave in to the oppressive empire, they won the war as well as the freedom to practice Judaism again.

Following their military victory, the Maccabees’ first stop was the Temple. When the Maccabees reclaimed the defiled Temple, they tried to rekindle the 7-branched menorah, the iconic symbol of the Temple. But when they searched for oil to reignite it, they found insufficient oil. The Talmudic Rabbis, hundreds of years later, provided the Midrashic tale that became a foundational story of the holiday: the oil lasting 8-days. However, the Talmudic rabbis also lamented missing the 8-day holiday of Sukkot during the raging war. Whether the oil really lasted 8-days or whether this was a vehicle to help future generations to remember, is unclear.

There are two other theories in naming the festival of Chanukah. The name “Chanukah” can be broken down into “chanu” and “kaf hey”, “[they] rested [on the] twenty-fifth”, referring to the fact that the Jews ceased fighting on the 25th day of Kislev, the day on which the holiday begins. Chinuch, from the same root, is the name for Jewish education.

DISCUSS

1. Just like the Maccabees restored and rededicated the Temple to Judaism, during Chanukah , we too have the opportunity to rededicate to our goals and ideals. As you light the menorah, what are your goals?
2. What do you want to rededicate yourself to?
3. How will you rededicate yourself to this in the coming year and how will you stay dedicated? What do you think being Hellenized meant then and why was that a problem?



CHANUKAH AND ISRAEL

DISCUSS

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Discuss the miracle of Israel. What does it mean to have an Israel, after 2,000 years and why.
4. How does Israel figure into Jewish identity elsewhere?
5. 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).
6. 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 chayalim.
7. Is there something in your life that you want to improve or to which you want to rededicate yourself this season?
8. Chanukah celebrates the victory of the underdogs, Judah the Maccabee and his band of rebels, over the great Greek Seleucid army. What is an example of an underdog victory that makes you proud?

