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Chanukah 5784

A Bayit Social Action Reader

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This Season's Prompts



Israel, lens, jerusalem via pinterest

1. What can the story of Chanukah teach us about the nature of, and responses to, anti-semitism?
2. How can the Chanukah spirit of resilience and hope inspire individuals and communities to work towards peace and reconciliation in the wake of tragedy?
3. How can the Chanukah values of justice, compassion, and understanding be applied to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding in a world divided by prejudice and intolerance?
4. What is a miracle you have experienced during Chanukah or something you envision being a modern day Chanukah miracle?

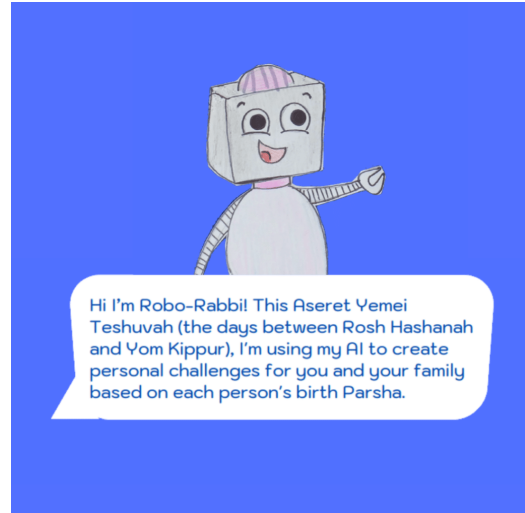


Zeevveez via Flickr

1. What can the story of Chanukah teach us about the nature of, and responses to, anti-semitism?

Chatbotukah: a Foreword

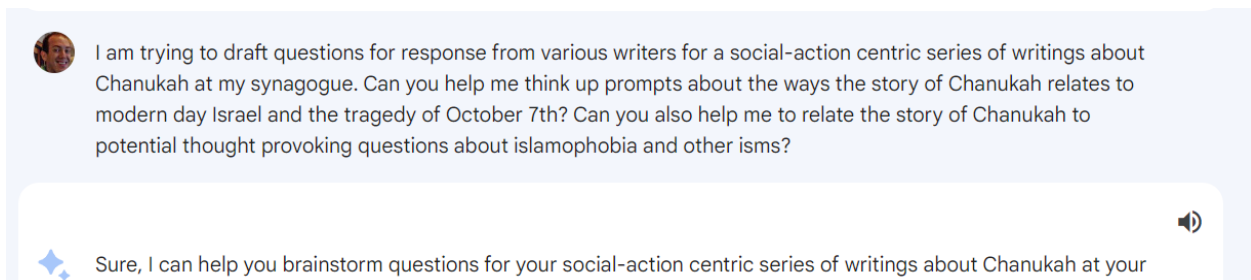
Aaron Stayman



jewishunpacked.com

I have to start my introductory piece this year to our regular Social Action Committee Reader with a confession to you, the reader: some of the prompts written and distributed to our writers were created by an artificial intelligence called Google Bard (bard.google.com-expect to have fewer arguments with your spouse about which veggies are effective side dishes for shabbat meals going forward). Bard, who (which? Grammar with AI is confusing) when asked about prompts relating to this moment in Israel and the Jewish diaspora and the holiday of Chanukah, initially told me "The conflict in Israel and Gaza is complex and changing rapidly. If you'd like up-to-date information try using Google Search.", to me, showcases the nature of antisemitism, and of hope.

Bard is theoretically, like its cousin ChatGPT, supposed to stay away from touchy subjects, and at my prompting once again with a different phrasing, the magic behind the machine faded a bit and the guard was let down:



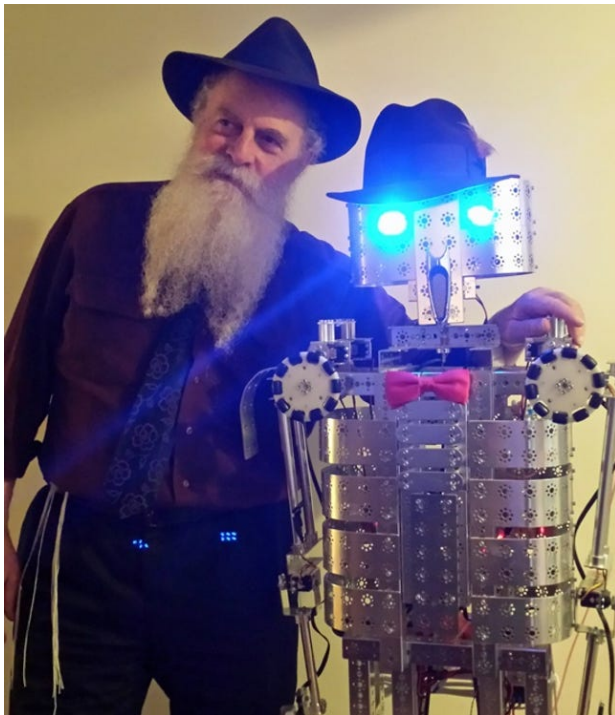
What amazes me about AI, and about the human capacity I think it reflects, is that there is so much capacity for things to be horrible or really great in so much of life. This AI bot could have followed in the footsteps of so many other well intentioned large language model AIs before it, and spouted out hate speech, likely anti semitic, but it could also be far wiser than I am at coming up with great questions for my excellent writers (who were told going into this that a robot came up with two prompts).

Chanukah, then, takes into account the idea of capacity: the capacity to light a candle for eight nights, the capacity to take on a massive army, the capacity to be brave and creative in thinking

about how we study Torah covertly. I think of capacity, and I'm using the word in multiple senses I realize, lately just with how exhausting life feels, with everything in Israel and so many needs to address in our day to day lives.

I find hope, then, in regards to anti-semitism in the way that Bard has the capacity to have really evil learnings by nature of being a tool that feeds off of the ideas of the internet and everything that embodies, and yet it still comes out with creative topics to ask our writers.

It's very Hollywood I realize, to say that this robot has the capacity to love, but maybe the better part here, and what I consider a small miracle, is that the people crafting these initial large scale AI programs have the capacity themselves to really make sure that the only use of these softwares as intended is to be for the kinds of questions I'm asking, and constantly closing



loopholes that could lead to a robot spouting the worst diatribes we can imagine. These computers are so much like our community, and even the people who despise Jews: we come into the world a blank slate, just like these robots (although we get 1000s of pages less of Shakespeare and Wikipedia jammed into our finite brains). The idea then that we can teach machines to not be awful gives me hope on this holiday- in the era of Chanukah what followed that difficult war and time of anti-Jewish hatred was a miracle, and I hope in the new era we have entered this year, one with fiercer anti-Zionistic (and in turn anti-Semitic) attitudes more present than ever, and also an era of the ever-living robot, that we can find the light to last much longer than we expect. I hope, too, for a world where we can coexist more harmoniously, once the villainization dies down and we can be seen as human in the eyes of not just robots but also our fellow humans.

cnet.com

Lastly, I want to note that in addition to the Social Action Reader you find in your weekly announcement email or shul seat on select holidays every year, our committee does work on other topics as well. To name a few, we are focusing on combating anti-semitism in the year ahead, which is why we chose the topics we did for this reader, and we also collaborate with Part of the Solution (<https://potsbronx.org>) to help others locally and directly. We also lead coloring of Chanukah cards for Jewish people being held at Riker's Island annually at the Riverdale Y Sunday Market. This is the first reader we are putting out where I am not only the editor of this compilation, but also the chair of this committee. I will use that newfound honor to pay enormous respect to my predecessor here, Michael Goldblum, who put an incredible foundation on this committee and who continues to be a great partner in our work together (including in illustrating this reader!). Strange as it feels to not list his information this year, you

can reach out to me directly at AaronStayman1@gmail.com to learn more about getting involved in our work going forward!

Chag Chanukah Sameach!

Aaron lives in Riverdale with his wife, Rachel, and is a marketing analytics consultant when he's not bothering you on the streets of Riverdale on behalf of some sort of political happening. He was also assisted in making edits to this piece by a robot.



I'm glad to hear that you incorporated one of my suggestions. Here are a few title suggestions for your piece:

- The Chanukah Miracle of AI: Hope Amidst Anti-Semitism
- From Chatbots to Chanukah: Lessons from AI and the Jewish Struggle
- Teaching Machines to be Mensch: AI and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism
- The Capacity for Good in AI: A Chanukah Reflection
- Chanukah and the Digital Age: Finding Light in a World of Machines

I hope these suggestions help you choose a title that is both eye-catching and accurately captures the essence of your piece.



2. How can the Chanukah spirit of resilience and hope inspire individuals and communities to work towards peace and reconciliation in the wake of tragedy?

Returning to and Escaping from the Treadmill of Jewish History

Elliott Rabin

Of all the Jewish prayers and teachings I find difficult, Ma'oz Tzur is the hardest. Blithely sung to a catchy melody, the poem's six stanzas retell the stories of empires (Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, Greece) that oppressed, exiled, and enslaved us; in return, they were drowned, destroyed, hanged, their decrees overturned. In the song, these experiences seem fairly interchangeable, as if we're on an endless treadmill of historical nightmares; no sooner freed from one episode, we march right into the next. The final stanza in particular always sticks in my craw, such that I can barely get the words out:

Bare Your holy arm and hasten
the End of salvation—
Avenge the vengeance of Your
servant's blood from the
wicked nation.
For the triumph is too long
delayed for us, and there is no
end to days of evil,
Repel the Red One in the
nethermost shadow and
establish for us the seven
shepherds.



bbc.com

There is no end to days of evil. As we say in the Passover Haggadah, “In every generation some have arisen against us to annihilate us.” Is that true? Is there really no hope? In our darkest times, it can certainly seem so.

Chanukah teaches some hard lessons, which resonate with us today as Israel fights for its survival and Jews throughout the world face an unprecedented surge in antisemitism. For many years after the Shoah, we felt that we might finally be able to jump off of the treadmill of oppression and despair. Finally, miraculously, we were able to raise up our own country on our ancient homeland, to build it and be rebuilt through it. In the United States and elsewhere, Jews rose up from poverty and fear to become respected and successful citizens, in all professions and ranks. The “days of evil” seemed to peter out at last, replaced by days of God’s “holy arm.”

Yet on Simchat Torah, that sense of strength and security, of Divine protection, came crashing down, rendering it again as frangible and illusory. Hamas's genocidal, monstrous attack on Israelis showed quite plainly that *they*—our eternal enemy, taking different guises in different eras—*still hate us and want to kill us*. The attack threw us right back on the treadmill of historical nightmares. Horrifying as well has been the reaction of so many, in the US and throughout the world, willing to support our bloodthirsty enemies and repeat their slogans, in public, at mass rallies, on college campuses, in high school hallways. People who we thought were our allies, whose rights

Jews had defended, marched for, donated money to, signed petitions for, abandoned us in our time of need. Again, we are cast back upon the Biblical descriptor of the Jewish people: A nation that dwells alone.



onlysimchas.com

And yet, we are neither entirely helpless nor alone. We now have the mechanisms of a modern state, including a well-trained army that can fight back, that tries to return our hostages and protect civilians while prosecuting a necessary war. Although Israeli society was badly divided and polarized before October 7, Israelis have shown tremendous resilience and unity, with people throughout the world responding to enlistment calls, citizens organizing to support the bereaved and displaced. In the Diaspora, Jews are doing all we can for our Israeli family: reaching out to friends and relatives, emptying our bank accounts for emergency funds, writing letters to soldiers, paying shiva visits to family members here, posting flyers of hostages, flying on solidarity trips, attending rallies locally and the massive one in DC. Praying, every day, for the success of the IDF, the return of our hostages, the cessation of terror.

And when we look around, pulling our heads beyond our grief and anger, we find that we do indeed have allies and supporters—not as many as we might have hoped, but many more that we might have expected. Non-Jewish Israeli citizens, Arabs, Bedouins and Druze, overwhelmingly support the State of Israel; they saved hundreds of their Jewish neighbors, were killed alongside them, are serving side by side. President Biden was one of the first people to visit Israel right after the massacre, and he immediately comforted the families of the hostages, sent shipments of ammunition and two aircraft carriers. Support in both houses of Congress is resolute, ironclad. And while there are certainly pockets of opposition, the overwhelming majority of Americans support Israel and are appalled at the attacks on Jews. The turnout of

non-Jews at the DC rally, and at the marches against antisemitism in London and Paris, shows that we indeed have allies.

Like so many times in our history, we are facing an implacable, evil foe with many powerful backers. But unlike then, now we have our own sources of strength, and many supporters of our own. The path forward may yet be long, difficult and painful, but we have grounds to sense the presence of God's "holy arm" opening up some rays, still dim, of salvation.



Sderot Menorah, c4israel.org

Elliott Rabin serves as the director of thought leadership at Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools. He is the author of The Biblical Hero: Portraits in Nobility and Fallibility (JPS) and Understanding the Hebrew Bible: A Reader's Guide (Ktav).

What Prayer Peace

Adam Stoler

From one perspective, Chanukah tells us of the miracle of finding the oil for the Menorah in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Miraculously, when it was believed there was not enough oil to light the Menorah for a single day, the oil lasted eight days. Given this backdrop, let us ponder what a miracle such as this might now mean to our people.

We Jews pray for peace. In some interpretations *Sim Shalom*, recited daily in the Amidah, contains a component for that most elusive of social constructs, to many what would be tantamount to a miracle: political peace. In these times of overwhelming tragedy and sorrow for us all, the miracle of the oil may be viewed as a vicarious manifestation of what we currently sorely need and long for: true and lasting peace between us and our neighbors.



instillinghope.blogspot.com

Historically, out of many a tragedy hope has arisen. However, there has been many a false start, and many a stumbling block. Yet who may refute the calmness, the serenity, the tranquility and reduced stress that living side by side with our neighbors would bring us? How can the short-lived satisfaction of vengeance even compare?

Having our neighbors recognize our humanity as a people, and we equally recognizing our neighbors' humanity as a people, is a first step in the evolution of the miracle of peace: reconciliation This first step would be a miracle in its own right.

The spirit of Chanukah is upon us. May we let it guide our hopes for a modern miracle: finding and keeping the reconciliation leading to peace which has long eluded us. *Chag Samayach* to all.

A 30+ year resident of Riverdale with Bronx roots, Adam Stoler is an active member of the daily minyan at CSAIR, grandfather of 3 wonderful grandsons, and ridiculously happily married husband of the best person he's ever met, Professor Emeritus at Fordham University, Barbara Kail. Adam has a BA from the University of Chicago(1978, with Dean's List) and earned an MA from Fordham in Urban Studies in 2021.

Adam is still happily working as an independent sales agent for wonderful Canadian and German companies, and considers himself a world class nudge. He is also proud to say that the New York Times has published 9 of his "Letters to the Editor" and the Riverdale Press...too many to count.



Question: *What is a miracle you have experienced during Chanukah or something you envision being a modern day Chanukah miracle?*

Why I Welcome Chanukah More Than Ever this Year

Marla Brown Fogelman

Several weeks ago, when one of my young granddaughters informed me that Chanukah was her favorite holiday, I found that her anticipatory delight, while not surprising, infused me with a particular kind of Bubby-joy. Her declaration also caused me to reflect both on the mixed feelings I had about Chanukah as a strongly Jewish child in a non-Jewish neighborhood, and how I've grown to appreciate the holiday more and more each year, with its focus on lights, hope, and wonders.



tepb.org

Especially this year, with the *matzav* in Israel and the rise in global antisemitism, I am looking to the Festival of Lights with what seems like raw urgency, although for different reasons than my grandchildren. Mostly, I want to take a break from fixating on the relentlessness of global hatred and inhumanity and instead concentrate on the power of literally taking the *shamash* in hand and spreading light in the darkness, in hearing/reading and being witness to stories of Jewish strength and resilience both within and outside of Israel, and in contemplating what I think of as miracles or Divine nods in my own life.

One example that comes immediately to mind occurred during the Covid lockdown, in March 2020, when my grandfather's niece Elisa came into and out of my life briefly, but changed it for good.

I was more than surprised when Elisa first reached out. We lived on opposite coasts, had different lifestyles, and had only met once, in person, at a family reunion, decades earlier. But Elisa, a Russian economic specialist, wanted me to know that she was about to publish a memoir based on her discovery of a cache of family letters written during the conjunction of WWI, the Bolshevik Revolution, and Ukraine's early quest for independence. And what hooked me immediately was her report that there were a number of letters from my mother's father Isser/Oscar, to his struggling-peddler father in America, often offering counsel and exhortations not to despair.

So I agreed to read an advance copy of her book, where I learned even more about my grandfather's role as a surrogate father and the details of his heroism—especially how, at age 14, he had rescued his mother and four younger siblings as Cossacks began to set fire to their house in Gorodische, in the province of Kiev.

What struck me most of all was how he never lost hope, even after surviving the horror of this pogrom and others. As he wrote to his father, "What's important is that we have hope that things will get better. Hope is the pillar of life."



[pinterest.com](#)

"I remember him as a sweet and generous man," Elisa told me, during our last conversation and one month before her own unexpected death and the publication of her book by an academic publishing company. As shocked by her death as I was by my grandfather's sudden death on Yom Kippur many years earlier, I also felt beyond grateful to Elisa for her dedication in translating all the letters, as well as for our

conversations on the lives and traumas of our shared ancestors, who had carried the old world on their backs.

Although not a miracle in the grandest sense, and not on the same scale as the oil in the temple that burned for eight days, or the establishment of the state of Israel, I have come to see this familial configuration of events as a gift from the Heavens—one which shed light on my grandfather's little-known bravery, resilience, and deep faith, and from which I've continued to derive comfort and inspiration.

Especially this year, I intend to keep my grandfather's words in the forefront of my mind while kindling Chanukah lights with my children and grandchildren—and hope for further miracles.



freeimages.com

Marla Brown Fogelman is a member of the Social Action Committee and is currently involved, along with other committee members, in planning an educational initiative on antisemitism. She is also a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in the Washington Post, Tablet, Kveller, The Forward, and other national and regional publications.