

NIGHT 7 | MAI HANUKKAH?

Mai Hanukkah? What is Hanukkah? It is as the Rabbi's taught in a Baraita: "On the 25th of Kislev the days of Hanukkah commence. They are eight days in all on which it is not permitted to eulogize or to fast. For when the Syrian-Greeks entered the sanctuary, they defiled all the oils they found there. And when the Hahmonaim gained the upper hand and defeated them, they searched and found only one jar of oil stamped with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. But the oil in the jar was enough for only one day's lighting. Yet a miracle happened, and it lasted for eight days. The following year, these days were established as a festival on which Hallel is said, and Modim (Thanksgiving). --BT Shabbat 21b

The story of the miracle of the oil is one response to the meaning behind this eight-day holiday. Because Hanukkah is a late-holiday and because it lacks an agreed upon narrative, yet celebrates a Jewish ideological civil war, it carries with it many interpretations and meanings, varying greatly based on the time and place in which the holiday is being celebrated.

For some, Hanukkah is about Jewish political courage and military prowess.

For others, it is a time to focus on God's role in the miracles of the season

Others focus on the success of the Hashmonaim over the religious persecution of the Greeks and the rededication of the Temple.

Some find the message of the Small over the Mighty most compelling

Others speak of the courageous response against the threat of Assimilation into Greek Culture

Others focus on the need for light in the darkness

What do you think is the real message of Hanukkah?

What is the "miracle" for which you are most grateful at this time of year?



NIGHT 8 | AL HANISIM (For the Miracles)

Al Hanisim, v'al ha-purkan, v'al hag'vurot, v'al hateshuot,

v'al hamilchamot sh'asita l'avoteinu v'imoteinu bayimim hahem bazman hazeh.

For the miracles, for the salvation, for the mighty deeds, the victories, and the battles which You performed for our ancestors in those days, at this time. In the days of Mattathias, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, and his sons, when the evil Greek kingdom rose up against your people...You in your great mercy stood up for them at their time of distress...You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few. —*Hanisim prayer*

What do you consider "miraculous" at this season?

What role does human action play in setting the stage for miracles?

Who are "the strong" and "the weak" in our society? What would it mean today for "the weak" to triumph over "the strong"?

Do you count yourself among "the strong" or "the weak"? Why? What steps are you taking to help the weak in their own struggle?

A Little Learning/ Kavanah for Hanukkah

by
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One for each night for
Park Slope Jewish Center



NIGHT 1 | SOLSTICE

Anyone who has spent time outside recently knows that Hanukkah, like Christmas and all holidays of this season, are also responses to the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year. For months, the days have been getting shorter, the darkness deeper and more encompassing. And on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the presence of not only the sun but also the moon is quite small. The darkness of the long nights is even more palpable. Imagine the intensity and fear of this darkness in the days prior to electricity.

The Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zara 8b*, describes this situation with a story about the first human being's encounter with winter nights:

"When HaAdam, the first human, noticed that each day (after his creation in Tishrei) grew shorter, he said: "Oy! Poor me. Perhaps I sinned and now the world is darkened because of me and it is now returning to chaos. This is my death sentence decreed by the Heavens".

But just around Hanukkah, the tide begins to turn, and slowly, minute by minute, the days begin to lengthen...light returns to a world that has become dark.

The Talmud continues Adam's story saying:

So Adam stood and fasted and prayed for eight days. At last he saw the day getting longer in the month of Tevet (immediately after Kislev) and he realized: "The waxing and the waning of the day is simply the way of the world, the natural cosmic order." Therefore he went and celebrated for eight days. The following year he established these eight days of festivity as a permanent annual holiday.

**This passages focuses us on Hanukkah's connection to the Winter Solstice, and our natural human desire to bring light to our lives. May the light of Hanukkah bring you light and comfort and hope when the darkness around us feels overwhelming.*



NIGHT 2 | THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE

The essence of Hanukkah is “Hoda’ah” (thanksgiving/praise) as Rashi writes in BT Shabbat 24a: “All the matters of Hanukkah were essentially established for praise”.

Hoda’ah, to thank, has two meanings: 1) to admit the truth 2) to give thanks. --From Siftey Hayim

**Why is Hanukkah connected to Hoda’ah?*

**Why do you think Hoda’ah involves not only “giving thanks” but also “admitting the truth”?*

**What, if anything, does it add to your experience of the world to “acknowledge the truth” that no one of us has received all that we have solely through our own efforts?*

**What do you have to give thanks for this Hanukkah?*

NIGHT 3 | INCREASE THE LIGHT

Our Rabbis taught: The primary mitzvah of Hanukkah is that we light “the lights of Hanukkah” in our homes each night. The zealots (kindle) a light for each member of the household. Beit Shammai maintain: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced, but Beit Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased.--*Shabbat 21b*

Why do you think Shammai wanted to start with eight lights and reduce the number each night? Some argue that he wanted it to correspond to the number of days left to come, others that it corresponds to the number of animals offered each day of Sukkot (remember that many understand Hanukkah to have been a delayed celebration of Sukkot).

Why do you think Hillel argued for increasing the number of lights each night? Some reason that it shall correspond to the number of days that have passed. Others state that the reason is because “we promote in matters of sanctity but do not reduce”.

We follow the custom of Hillel. If you could choose, which approach would you choose? Why?

NIGHT 4 | LAMP IN THE WINDOW

We are told to place the Hanukkah lamp by the door of one’s house on the outside.

If one dwells in an upper chamber, it should be placed at the window nearest the street.--*Shabbat 21b*

Why must we place our Hanukkiah near the door or window?

Why is publicizing the miracle so important around Hanukkah?

We are told to try to light our Hanukkiah as close to sunset as possible, when we expect people to be on the street. What is the miracle we need to publicize?

What is the message of Hanukkah you most want to pass on to those walking by?

NIGHT 5 | SHEHECHEYANU

In the Talmud, Shabbat 23a, it says: “On the first day the one who sees makes two blessings and the rest of the days one blessing.” And it is explained that the one who sees the Hanukkiyah from the street on the first night blesses *Shehecheyanu*. This implies that only the one who sees the candle can say the blessing over time (*shehecheyanu*), but without seeing it, one can not bless it.

What is the difference between this and other holidays in which we offer the blessing of time (shehecheyanu) on the day itself?

Why here is it not possible to offer the blessings of shehecheyanu without seeing the candles?

It is explained that the days of Hanukkah are not holy in and of themselves, and only in the awakening of the soul of Israel by means of the candles is it possible for one to sanctify the days. Therefore, by means of seeing the lights one can awaken the soul of Israel and therefore one can already offer the blessing of the time, but without this awakening from the soul of Israel, these days are not holy in the way other holidays are holy. --*Or Gedalya*

Or Gedalya teaches that the essence of the Day of Hanukkah IS the candles themselves because those candles represent not only the oil but the God-created light from the very beginning of the story of Creation, the light that (before it was hidden away) allowed the first human beings to have a clarity of vision usually unavailable to us most of the time. But when we light these candles on Hanukkah, we connect to that Hidden Light—and we have the opportunity to reflect on that light and to share it with others.



NIGHT 6 | A PERSONAL LIGHT

We are taught to light the candles of Hanukkah at home (not just in the synagogue).

We are also encouraged to have a hanukkiah for each member of the household
The primary mitzvah of Hanukkah is that we light “the lights of Hanukkah” in our homes each night. The zealots (kindle) a light for each member of the household. --*Shabbat 21b*

Why is it important to do this ritual at home?

We are also taught that, unlike with other candles, we should not use these lights for other purposes, like reading or finding one’s way in a dark room. Why is this limitation placed on Hanukkah candles?

Why might we be encouraged to have Hanukkiah for each member of the household?

We are taught that these are very personal candles, symbolic not only of the miracle of Hanukkah but of our own inner light. As such their light is unique to each one of us. When we light these candles in our homes, we hope to identify our own personal light—and then, by placing the Hanukkiah in our window, to share it with the world as a whole.