



CHANUKAH LIGHTS COMPANION

A compilation of Divrei Torah from our
NCSY campus leaders across North America



NCSY is the international
youth movement of the OU

INTRODUCTION

Light vs. dark. Good vs. evil.

Not only are these key catchphrases in just about every Hollywood blockbuster movie, but they are also the primary themes of many of the Jewish holidays. The *chanukiah*, with its eight bright lights, may be the most iconic symbol of Jewish victory over tyranny. In fact, it is stated in the *Asifas Chachamim* that all of the Jewish holidays that celebrate miracles that G-d performed for the Jewish people involve some sort of reference to—or focus on—light. When speaking about the miracles of the exodus from Egypt that we celebrate on Pesach, the Torah tells us, “Yet all the Israelites had light in their dwellings” (Exodus 10:23). On Purim, we read from *Megillat Esther* which says “And the Jews had light and happiness and joy and honor” (Esther 8:16). On Chanukah, among other miracles, we celebrate not only the physical miracle of the oil lasting eight nights instead of just one, but we celebrate the spiritual miracle of light, our Torah, over the Hellenism that the Syrian Greeks sought to force upon us.

The battles of light vs. darkness continue to this very day. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tells a story of a meeting he had with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Mr. Netanyahu had just been appointed Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations. He says that when they met, the Rebbe gave him the following advice on serving at the U.N. The Rebbe said, “You will go into a house of lies. Remember that in a hall of perfect darkness, if you light one small candle, its precious light will be seen from afar, by everyone. Your mission is to light a candle for truth and for the Jewish people.”

This is a time of challenge and difficulty not just for the Jewish people, but the world at large. The darkness of COVID-19 has enveloped us all: a darkness the likes of which the world has never seen. However, seeing our NCSY Judah Fellows at work, witnessing their sincere dedication and perseverance, we could not be prouder of them as they each serve as a candle amidst the darkness. They bring light to countless others on their college campuses, in their communities, and beyond. Our hope is that these *divrei Torah* will give you a glimpse of their unyielding desire for Jewish growth and serve as a glimmering beacon of Torah thought, as we all hope and pray for G-d to once again deliver us from darkness, with shining light.

Wishing you a happy and healthy Chanukah,

The Judah Fellowship Team

Shira Gabriel

York University
Canada NCSY

This year has gone by awfully fast. First we were counting down the seconds till midnight struck and it was 2020, then COVID-19 hit and online school began, then before we knew it all the holidays flew right past us, and now Chanukah is right around the corner. But where did all this time go? How did this year fly by so fast while we couldn't go out and celebrate and spend time with our family and those we love? With Chanukah coming up, it feels like the same thing is going to happen: we will be sitting at home, celebrating the *chag* and not having the chance to celebrate with the Jewish community.

There is something different about Chanukah than all the other holidays: something that will change how we feel about how things are going. During Chanukah we have many traditions such as eating sufganiyot, making latkes, spinning the dreidel, and giving gifts—all fun things that we can enjoy with our families. But the one thing that makes this holiday so special that can bond all the Jewish people throughout the pandemic is the lighting of the Chanukah candles. For eight nights, we light the *chanukiah* and place it by the window. We do this to publicize the miracle of the holiday both to ourselves and our neighbours. By placing the *chanukiah* by the window, we are standing out in our neighbourhoods. There is a bond between all the Jewish families that are doing this. Although we are not all together celebrating Chanukah due to the COVID-19 restrictions, we are all celebrating together by lighting the candles beside our windows, and it is a stronger bond than any celebration can ever be. We are all celebrating together even though we are not there physically together.

Chanukah stresses the importance of community, and it seems ironic that this year it is being commemorated in isolation. However, I believe that taking a closer look at

the history of this holiday will give us a different perspective on this *chag*. While the war took place, the Greeks forbade the Jews from learning Torah and practicing their religion. The Jewish people would instead learn anyway, and as soon as the Greeks would come to their door, they would hide everything and begin to play with the dreidel. Today, although we are unable to celebrate together with our Jewish community, we are able to celebrate this holiday with our families, publicizing our *chanukiah* by our window, learning about the *chag* with our families without fear of being killed for it, and continuing on with the Chanukah traditions from our homes. Ultimately, whether we celebrate the *chag* with our families or—due to COVID-19—by ourselves in our homes, we are never alone: Hashem is always with us.

Ashley Klein

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“Dreidel, dreidel, dreidel.” The familiar tune immediately surfaces in your mind. “I made it out of clay.” You find yourself wanting to spin the miniature toy. “And when it’s dry and ready.” It dances across your mind and lands. “Oh, dreidel I shall play.” Gimel! You won! *Nes gadol hayah sham*: a great miracle happened there. *Nun, gimel, hei, shin*.

According to Rabbi Bentzion Milecki, the letters of the dreidel share the story of our Jewish history and its purpose. In kabbalistic teachings, a person is comprised of the body, the soul, and the intellect; *guf, nefesh, and seichel*. The world’s historical empires are comprised of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. As part of the Jewish narrative, each time these empires attacked the Jewish people, we survived and lived to tell the tale. When the Babylonian Empire attacked the Jews, they attacked the *guf (gimel)*. They destroyed the Beit Hamikdash, the body of the Jewish people. The Persians attacked the *nefesh (nun)*, of the Jewish people:

the soul. The Greeks utilized science and intellect, *seichel (shin)*, to prove the Torah erroneous. And lastly, the Roman Empire utilized all three to delegitimize Judaism. All: *hakol (hei)*. The letters of the dreidel. Using these ideas brought by Rabbi Bentzion Milecki, we can gain insight into the dreidel. What seems to be a playful game actually represents the past and the future of *am Yisrael*.

Chanukah is the time of miracles, the time when we see the light in the darkness. It is significant that dreidel is played during Chanukah, as it will eventually be the light that removes us from the darkness. Light is a power—to live, we rely on the sun’s light, energy and warmth—yet it must be harnessed and controlled for it to yield its desired effect. We, as Jews, must learn to not only use the energy of the sun by being a source of energy, but more so to realize the potential of the moon, which only reflects the energy it has received. We, with the dreidels, must be a light. We must be a light to those around us, since that light reflects. We must be the best possible versions of ourselves, the lights in the darkness. *Nes gadol hayah sham* will become *nes gadol hayah poh* (a great wonder happened here) and the *nachash* will manifest its way into Moshiach. And so, with the help of the dreidel, Chanukah will be the true dedication of these miracles.

Source: Rabbi Bentzion Milecki, “Lessons from the Dreidel,” [chabad.org: https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1693257/jewish/Lessons-from-the-Dreidel.html](https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1693257/jewish/Lessons-from-the-Dreidel.html)

Matthew Friedman

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When you ask someone what their favorite part of Chanukah is, most of the time you’ll get an answer like “gifts” or “latkes” or “donuts.” When I get asked this question, my immediate answer is lighting the candles. There is so much to interpret about the story of the candles and so much that we can take away from it. Once the Maccabees had finished

their fight and won their war, they went back to the Temple to light the menorah, only to realize that there was enough oil for just one night. With the help of Hashem, these candles lasted for eight nights. How does a story about candles burning a little extra long relate to anything? There is so much to take away from this and there is so much to be learned.

The nation of Israel can be represented by a flame. Our passion, our willingness to grow, and our willingness to learn makes the fire grow bigger. But there is so much around us trying to diminish this flame—so much antisemitism in the past and in the present, along with many other obstacles that Jews have been facing, time and time again, that shrink the flame. The flame should have blown out after just one night. But against all odds, the flame continues to burn for eight nights. And the Jewish people are still here, still fighting. As a kid I always loved lighting the candles and thought it was so beautiful. But now, I understand it so much more deeply.

Antisemitism is on the rise again around our world. People are starting to feel comfortable again degrading and attacking the Jewish people. Once more, our nation is under attack and the people surrounding us are trying to diminish our flame. This is why we need to stand up proud and continue to fight for our religion. Make sure to stand up for Israel, continue to learn, and continue to grow. This is the way our nation stays alive and, against all odds, continues to be an eternal flame.

Julia Wolf

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In December of 2019, my family was traveling around South America for winter break vacation. It was Chanukah, and whatever country we were located in we always tried to find a Jewish community or a shul to celebrate with. One night when we were in Chile, we were on a mission to find a local restaurant that

the concierge assured us was a “five to ten-minute walk” from the hotel. Much like the Jews in the desert, we ended up wandering in the scorching Chilean heat in an unknown park for about 40 minutes (although it felt like 40 years).

Feeling lost and totally miserable, we decided that it was a lost cause and that we would never find the place we were looking for. We were about to turn around when we happened to stumble upon a group of men wearing *kippot*, walking toward some town square on the outskirts of the park. Curious and comforted by the sight of “our people,” we followed them to check out what was going on, and little did we know... G-d had led us to a community Chanukah celebration in Santiago, Chile!

We were met with kindness and love from the locals, and in broken English mixed with Hebrew everyone wished us a *Chag Sameach* and a Happy Chanukah. Not only did this warm Jewish community welcome us in to sing, dance, and eat with them, they also gave my family the honor of lighting the first candle on the menorah. I was amazed how despite the language barrier, with the Chileans speaking Spanish and with us speaking English, we were able to sing the same songs and prayers, and communicate through Jewish *ruach*. The head rabbi in the community gave a *d’var Torah*, and although we could not translate his sermon, we somehow could still understand exactly what he was saying. This was an absolutely unforgettable experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

On our walk home, I could not stop thinking about how miraculous this event was. I thought to myself, *how perfect is it that we experienced such a miracle, one that brought so much light into our life, on the very holiday that celebrates the miracle of light!* On Chanukah, we are celebrating the miracle of the oil that lasted eight whole days. After defeating King Antiochus’s mighty army, the Maccabees came to liberate Jerusalem and

to restore the Second Temple. Upon their arrival, the Temple was in shambles, and there was only enough oil to light the menorah for one day! But Hashem granted the Jews a miracle and made it so that the oil lasted for eight days, exactly enough time for the new purified oil to be made so that the menorah could be lit for as long as needed.

For me, this is what a miracle is: when something happens when you least expect it, but just when you need it. Hashem continues to grant us miracles every day, if we only choose to see them. When you are running late to work and you hit every green stoplight, this is a miracle. When it rains all week but the sun comes out the day you have an outdoor event, this is a miracle. When you are going through a rough time and your friend calls you, out of the blue, and makes your day, this is a miracle too.

It would have been so easy to look at the Chilean Chanukah celebration that we stumbled upon as a coincidence, something that just happened to be along our path toward the far-away restaurant. But we were feeling so hopeless and disheartened, and finding this community was exactly what we needed to lift our spirits and to fill our hearts with light! And this, I believe, is a true miracle.

Especially with the challenging and unnerving state of the world today, it may be difficult to see goodness amid all the darkness that seems to engulf our day-to-day lives. This Chanukah season, though, I encourage you to try to focus on the miracles (large and small) that bring light into your life! It is amazing how this slight shift in mindset can in turn illuminate the world around you. *Chag sameach*, and Happy Chanukah to all!

Maya Steinberg

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New Jersey NCSY

On Chanukah it is a Jewish tradition to light the candles of the *chanukiah* with a separate candle, the *shamash*. In Judaism a candle's flame can represent many things, one being the human soul or *neshamah*. An interesting question that arises is in the case where we don't have a *shamash*: May we use one candle's light to light another candle? To answer this we look to the Talmud, specifically the commentary of two rabbis, Rav and Shmuel, who discuss questions like these. Whenever they are in disagreement, the law follows Rav; however, there are only three exceptions to this and one of them is this disagreement.

Rav argues that if you use one candle's flame to light another it diminishes the significance of the first candle. This is because Rav believes if a Jew becomes involved with someone less religious than themselves then that Jew's standards diminish for themselves. In other words, Rav claims that using one candle's flame to light another's is the same as a Jew involving their *neshamah* with a less religious person, which, he argues, would diminish the initial candle and the Jew's light.

Shmuel argues the opposite. Shmuel believes that when a candle is used to light another candle, the first candle has now spread its light and made the world shine brighter. This is reflected in how, if a Jew spreads their *neshamah* into someone else's life they have not diminished their own Judaism; rather, they have allowed Jewish light in the world to grow. From this we learn that giving isn't actually diminishing. Instead it is fueling and spreading light.

Just as our *neshamah* is compared to the flame, the candle is symbolic of who the Jewish people are: givers. Just as we see in the Torah, Avraham Avinu taught us *chessed* when he opened up his home and gave meals to anyone needing to eat. Judaism shows, time and time again, through

tzedakah, *tikun olam*, and many more ideals that giving is rooted in our genes. Therefore, if spreading one little flame can brighten many other candles, spreading a Jewish light to another cannot possibly diminish the Jewish light. May we all continue to spread our light onto all those around us.

Eden Janfar

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So, Chanukah. How are we to choose a concept from such an array of ideas? I recently learned an amazing concept from my rabbi in Great Neck, Rabbi Hasson. Usually, the Jewish holidays' names represent their essence. For example, Rosh Hashanah, the start of the new year; or Pesach, Hashem's "passing over" of Jewish firstborns, and even Shavuot, the counting of the weeks until the receiving of the Torah.

So, what does Chanukah translate into? *חנוכה* descends from the Hebrew word "מחנה," or "camp," whose root is "ח-נ-ה", or literally, to "park" and rest. We have to ask the obvious question here: Why would Chanukah, a celebration of the Maccabees' victory against the Greeks, not include any element of those battles? In fact, why would the name Chanukah emphasize rest? Is it not noteworthy that we overcame our enemies?

So, here comes a fascinating idea: The *Megillat Antiochus* brings down that the soldiers in the Chanukah story were all seasoned Torah scholars. However, would we not have fared better with young, healthy, and skilled fighters? Would they not be more suited for war? The answer is that only the Torah scholars understood precisely the point at which it became absolutely necessary to respond in self-defense.

We are not a blood-hungry people. We are not a people that long for war; on the contrary, we make every effort to avoid it. As a result, we do not commemorate the intense warfare and succession over our en-

emies—no, that is not our essence. Our celebration is only for the *חנה*, or rest, that comes from it. As a result, our recognition of Chanukah symbolizes our longing for harmony and accord, contrasted to a remembrance of military victory. *Be'ezrat Hashem*, may we always look forward to a life of truce, unity, and peace.

Shajar Gonzalez

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Very generally, the Chanukah story seems pretty standard: the Jewish people fighting against other peoples—nothing new. However, in this instance, we know the Greeks. We learn about their mythology, their contribution to modern society, their incredible philosophers, and the creativity that sparked from the ancient Greek civilizations. The civilization thrived and was greatly successful, but they were somehow defeated by the Maccabees, and eventually, their powerful empire dissipated and became lost.

On the flip side, the Jewish people were forced into slavery in Egypt and were forced to walk the desert for years, continuously needing to conquer the land that was given by Hashem. Yes, as a people we thrived, but it took us a great effort, and more often than not, the odds were stacked against us. Knowing this, the Maccabees fought the Greeks anyway, and thousands of years later, here we are. Our very existence is miraculous.

How can a civilization as great and advanced as the Greeks decline so quickly, when the tiny Jewish nation, constantly at battle, prevailed? Sophocles, a Greek tragedian alive in the sixth century BCE, wrote, "Acceptance—that is the great lesson suffering teaches..." In Judaism, we believe that there is a good that comes from every instance of suffering. We teach that every downhill is always followed by an uphill. There is always something more to our suffering than our emotions and acceptance. Yet, Sophocles says otherwise.

The Greeks had multiple gods, believing that death means nothing. He says we struggle simply because we struggle. There are no real forces at play, so it doesn't matter what we do or don't do on this earth.

Epicurus, a philosopher at the time, explains, "Death is nothing to us—because something which is decomposed has no senses and something without senses is nothing to us." He says there can't be anything beyond death, because we become dust, and dust is nothing.

Judaism, on the other hand, tells us that we were created to be loved by Hashem. "The purpose for which the world was created is that the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to have an abode in the lower realms" (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Nasso 16). We spend our entire lives dedicating all our actions to Hashem, to be closer to him and to elevate our soul. Judaism surrounds itself with hope. The idea that we were created in love, to love—not for us, but for Hashem—gives us a purpose, a reason to leave a spark in this world. We are taught that there is more after death, that *Olam Habah* exists, that the world to come is the real destination. It doesn't mean our time on earth is meaningless. On the contrary, what we do creates our own *Olam Habah* to bask in the glory of Hashem.

The Greeks didn't have this idea. Their civilization wasn't built on purpose, love, or hope. Their tragedies—their finite worlds—were simply that: finite. Their lives ended and that was it. There was no reason to look beyond, so they allowed themselves to indulge in the material world because they lacked a purpose. If you have nothing to live for, nowhere to go, what happens to you? You dissipate into the void, become lost, which is exactly what happened to the Greeks.

Over thousands of years, Judaism survives, flourishes, and has become the incredible community it is today. Many empires, countries, governments, and people, have tried to get rid of us, to knock us down countless

times. Yet, here we are. We are strong because we are built on hope. We believe with all our hearts, as we say in the *Shema*, that Hashem is here for us, that He has a plan for us, that He loves us, and that He will not abandon us.

Our Chanukah light is a symbol of hope. It signifies this whole idea: that we refuse to be struck down. We refuse to say, "It is what it is." We didn't accept it then, all those years ago, and we won't let it happen now. When you light your Chanukah candles this year, think about the power you have: the strength to say, "I am here. I am not going anywhere. This is where I stand, and I am proud."

Jennifer Shamash

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New York NCSY

A "kosher" Chanukah menorah can be classified as having eight candle placeholders, in addition to a *shamash* placeholder, at a different height, to be distinguished from the rest. The *shamash* is a significant candle on the menorah: it is the first candle to be lit, and it is used to kindle the rest of the candles of the menorah.

In Hebrew, *shamash* can be translated as "servant," meaning that its primary purpose is to provide light for all the other candles on the menorah. The *shamash* can be seen, in essence, as a source of light, inspiration, and celebration. The *shamash* is placed apart from the other candles and remains available for use—"ready to serve" in case a candle blows out. The true mitzvah in lighting the menorah is fulfilled by the *shamash*, the provider of light.

If we look at the *shamash* from a different perspective, we too can fulfill the role of the *shamash* in life. In the same way that the *shamash* serves as the primary source of light for a menorah, we can serve as the primary source of light for people in our lives who may be in a dark, challenging time of their lives. And in the same way that the *shamash* stands

out on a menorah, placed above all the other candles, we can be the difference and make a change in others' lives.

It is important to recognize the *shamash*-like potential we have to make an everlasting impression on an individual. When influencing a friend, classmate, or relative to take on even the smallest mitzvah, that small source of light can serve as the spark to lighting all the other candles in that person's *neshamah*. *Mitzvot*—including attending shul on Shabbat, davening morning blessings, or even committing to weekly learning with a local rabbi or rebbetzin—can serve as a catalyst for bringing an individual closer to Hashem. The *shamash* can truly serve as a lesson to Jews everywhere.

Dylan Vermeire

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How many times do we wonder in a relationship, "Do they still love me?"; or in life,

"Did I do well?"; or in friendships, "What do they really think of me?" "Can we depend on each other?" "Can I trust them?" Or even in our own thoughts, we wonder, "Is G-d still with me?" The miracle of light: this is often what Chanukah is referred to. Chanukah has a great message and a deeper meaning, along with some very interesting coincidences.

For some background: In ancient Israel, around 160 BCE, there was a Greek invasion.

King Antiochus, a Greek, arrived and ordered that a boar be sacrificed to the Greek gods. A High Priest in the town, Mattathias, refused. Even after threats and attempts to bribe him, he still refused to carry out the sacrifice. Another Jew in the city was going to carry out the sacrifice of the boar. Mattathias killed him and the Greek soldier presiding over it. Mattathias and his sons fled their town in fear. Though they could have been killed, they risked their lives. They had G-d's

help. Mattathias and his sons—the eldest was Judah, commonly known as Judah Maccabee—started to form an army. They began their liberation movement for the Jewish people.

There are two miracles in the story of Chanukah. The first is that the ragtag militia of Jews—the Maccabees—were able to win a war against the organized and well-funded Greek army. And the second concerned the holy oil used for the menorah: The oil was almost entirely destroyed. Only one vial remained, and it was only enough to keep the flame lit for one day. However, G-d made the oil last for eight days—just long enough for some Jews to procure new pure and holy oil.

Yes, the Hebrews won the war against the Greeks, but the people might have thought that they did this without G-d. Maybe the Hebrews questioned whether G-d was there to help them. After all, the fighting lasted about twenty-five years. They could not see G-d in this prolonged fighting with the Greeks. They could not see the divine intervention, such as the parting of the Red Sea or the providing of the manna in the desert.

But why? I think that G-d stayed in the background. He loves us all and I think that He wanted to see us succeed. It reminds me of learning to ride a bike. At some point, we are going to have to take off the training wheels, have our parent let go of us, and ride.

So, perhaps the Chanukah light, lasting 8 days—which was the exact amount of time needed to press and deliver the new, pure oil—was reassurance from G-d: that he was still with us. Even in dark times. Literally and metaphorically, G-d provided light, hope, and a sign that could not have been clearer.

G-d provided to us a message in the simplest way: a flame. Even the smallest flame can start a blazing inferno. This is G-d's message. Never lose hope. Even with a small flame, a small army, and a small beginning, there is a way to grow and become

something greater than ever before, just as the Jews did after winning the war and rebuilding the Temple. Even in the darkest place, a tiny flame will glow like a lantern.

G-d is our lantern, our lighthouse on a stormy night, and we must reflect His light into the world as he does for us even in dark times. The light was a gift of love to let us know G-d was there and will always be there for us—which is something worth celebrating not just on Chanukah, but every day.

Rebecca Yaminian

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The story of Chanukah, the festival of lights and miracles, comprises infinite lessons for us to learn. Unpacking these lessons and taking them with us day to day can help us live happier and more fulfilling lives. One of the amazing perspectives I learned about lighting the Chanukah candles is in the simple concept of lighting one additional candle each night.

Each and every year, we begin the first night of Chanukah by lighting one of the eight candles. Why do we begin by igniting one flame the first night and follow by lighting one additional candle as the days of the holiday move on? Why don't we just light all eight candles each night? Wouldn't lighting all eight each night help us better understand the magnitude of the miracles Hashem did for us each day of the holiday?

I'd like to share one possible answer to these questions. The purpose of lighting one candle on the first night of Chanukah is to show us that for anything we would like to achieve in life, it starts with one step forward. In life, we may have big dreams for ourselves: to become the CEO of our own company, to become fully observant in all halakhot, to develop the strongest relationship with Hashem, to overcome all the obstacles pulling us back; the list never ends. Having these big goals of ours, all

at once, parallel the lighting of all eight candles at once. However, the act of lighting one candle at a time teaches us that, in order to better ourselves and attain our goals, we must develop a plan: start by lighting one candle, and move forward one step at a time.

This perspective of the Chanukah candles also sheds light on the areas in our lives where we feel complacent in our comfort zones, where we may have no plans or drive for growth. In these circumstances, it may feel as if we don't have any candles to light, so we don't light any of the possible eight. In these circumstances, the purpose of lighting one candle at a time is to teach us that even in the events where we feel most comfortable, where we have no intentions of growth, we should still move forward, one step at a time.

In my personal experiences, I find this lesson so valuable. Sometimes the places I want to go and the person I want to become all feel so far away. This distance feels a bit overwhelming. I ask myself, "Will I ever get there?" In other areas of my life, I feel so comfortable where I am and have no plans or drive for growth. The lesson of beginning with one step at a time helps make my wildest dreams become realistic and attainable, and—concerning the apathetic or self-satisfied areas of my life—this lesson pushes me to horizons I never even dreamed of reaching. It all begins with taking the first step and moving one step forward at a time. By the eighth night of our journey we call life, we will come to see the growth we have made, the impact the growth had on our outlook on life, and the whole chanukiah lit and bright.

This Chanukah, I challenge you to think about your life goals. Whether spiritual, mental, physical, career-oriented, etc., Chanukah teaches us that no dream is too big or too small to attain. I also challenge you to think about the areas in your life where you feel complacent, where you may not have any plans for growth. When

you light the Chanukah candles this year, remember that becoming a better “you” just takes moving one step forward, one candle at a time.

The idea for this d'var Torah came from this video: https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/3884452/jewish/3-Amazing-Things-You-Can-Learn-From-Your-Menorah.html

Leeat Goldstein

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When we think of Chanukah, we consider the fact that it is known as the “Festival of Lights.” But what does that really mean? In the story of Chanukah, Mattityahu encourages his sons, led by Shimon the Wise, to continue fighting in order to defend G-d’s Torah. On the other hand, Mattityahu’s son Judah was given the name “Maccabee,” an acronym that represents four Hebrew words: *Mi kamocho ba’elim Hashem* [the “e” sound in “Maccabee” coming from the first letter of one of the names of G-d that we don’t say in a context like this, out of respect for G-d, substituting the name ‘Hashem’ instead]” (Exodus 15:11), meaning “Who is like You, O G-d!” Antiochus attempts to wipe out the Maccabees twice but has no luck in defeating them either time. After the Maccabees’ victories, they decided to make their way back to Jerusalem to celebrate. On Kislev 25, Judah and his people returned to the Temple to rebuild what has been lost. As a result of their making a new menorah made out of metal, they found a little bit of oil remaining, only intended to last one day, which miraculously ended up lasting eight days.

You may be asking yourself about the significance of the oil lasting for 8 days. On the first day of Creation, G-d created darkness and light. Light is used to brighten up a dark room, to get you through dark paths, and to brighten up your day. Needless to say, all animals and human beings need light in order to survive on this earth. Chanukah is a time to spend time with your family and friends and look back on the victories that the

Jews had over the Greeks. It is also a time to look back on the miracle that occurred when the oil lasted for eight days instead of one.

During hard times, it is sometimes difficult to look at the light that shines ahead of you. Especially in today’s world, there is so much going on and so much chaos around us. Just as in the story of Chanukah, the Maccabees encountered periods of darkness, but in the end they defeated the Syrian Greeks. Take a step back. Take one day at a time. Find that light or passion that stands out to you and go after it. Take a small step every day to make the lives around you shine brighter. Whether going on a jog with your friend, helping an elderly person bring in their groceries, or giving someone a hug when they are having a bad day, I challenge you to do something nice for someone else. Light brings hope that everything is going to be all right not only today, but also in the future. A flower can’t grow in a dark room, and no human can grow to their full potential in spite of darkness. So take that next step.

Sabrina Akselrod

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Al Hanisim is the gratitude prayer, thanking Hashem for the miracles He made for us. The prayer has two parts. The first part is general and relevant to Chanukah and Purim. It’s said during the *Birkat Hamazon* (the blessing after eating a bread meal) and the *Shemonah Esrei* prayer. The word *nisim* means miracles. The holiday of Chanukah had *nisim niglim*, open miracles that can be seen physically; and Purim had *nisim nistarim*, hidden miracles since they were not seen by the Jewish people and were happening in the background.

The *Al Hanisim* prayer during Chanukah is longer and has more details of the story because we know more of the story and can physically understand the miracle that occurred. With the candles lasting

eight nights and the triumph of the Maccabees overcoming their battle with the Greeks, these are both *nisim niglim* and thus we have a longer prayer. Hashem performed these open miracles for the Jews to realize their intimacy to G-d and draw them even closer to him as a result. With the holiday of Chanukah falling in the winter, to light up the darkness, this prayer behooves us all to glean from this enlightening holiday a small spark of gratitude and thanksgiving to reflect on the miracles that happen in our daily life.

In the story of Purim, Hashem’s involvement is not seen. G-d’s name was never mentioned in the book of Esther, which is why it is considered *nisim nistarim*. Although G-d wasn’t mentioned directly in the story, we see that every time the book of Esther referred to the king, it actually refers to Hashem. The connection of hidden miracles can also be drawn from how Esther is referred to as *hester panim* which means “hidden face.” This is why the prayer is shorter on Purim: because the miracles in the Purim story were hidden. The drama of the Purim story is a direct example of G-d placing the right person (Esther), in the right place, at the right time.

There is a clear connection between both holidays and the *Al Hanisim* prayer, with the theme of giving gratitude for open and hidden miracles. In *Shemoneh Esrei*, a part of our everyday prayer said three times a day and containing nineteen blessings, in the first blessing—the *Avot*, or Patriarchs—there is an ending sentence referring to Hashem as the *oser*, *moshia*, and *magen*. *Oser* means “helper,” *moshia* means “savior,” and *magen* means “guard.” An idea is told that each is referring to miracles Hashem gives us in our everyday lives. *Oser*: something happens and G-d helps overcome, but a person must also put a lot of work into it. *Moshia*: a challenge arises and Hashem overcomes it, with the person doing little or no effort. *Magen*: a problem arose but it bypassed you; it didn’t end up applying to you, and

you didn't know the problem was in your orbit because you were "guarded" from it.

Every day we give thanks to Hashem for helping us through our own miracles, especially in these times. We give gratitude for our health and the happiness of our loved ones and ourselves.

Max Gutnik

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For the eight nights of Chanukah, we count up eight nights: one candle on the first night, two on the second, and so on. You're probably wondering why Jewish people count up. Well, the ideology behind it is that with each candle being lit we are looking forward to the completion and not the end. The miracle of Chanukah lasted for eight days. We aren't counting how much oil is left. We are counting how much the miracle grew. We light more and more candles each night because we start with a little and end with a lot. We want the small spark to grow bigger and better and not decrease.

During Chanukah, we place our menorahs on the window sills so that everyone passing by can see the menorah and see the light and grow together in knowledge and as a society. Someone passing by who doesn't know will now know what Chanukah is, and they will be taking a step forward into understanding our religion. Showing growth from one candle to eight is the greatest growth. Even when you start with a little you can always move up into more.

Jewish life on a college campus is a prime example of the power of Chanukah, because its audience is people who are often not as deeply involved or educated, at least at first. Just as we count up the number of candles on the nights of Chanukah, we count up the days of how students grow in studying Torah, getting involved, and practicing their religion and religious values. Growing in these numbers reflects self-growth as

a person, and that is certainly something every Jewish person should cherish.

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Like any Jewish holiday, Chanukah is celebrated by the consumption of special holiday foods. Chanukah, in particular, is a holiday known for its greasy, oily treats and eight days to plan when to have your first latke of the season. Common Chanukah foods are latkes—potato pancakes—and sufganiyot, more commonly known as jelly doughnuts.¹ An essential ingredient for both of these festival foods is oil. Both potato latkes and sufganiyot are encompassed in oil in their preparation. One might wonder why we eat such greasy foods on Chanukah. Why do we have to diet the week before and after the holiday to stay in the same weight range as November? The answer lies in the fact that oil is also a key ingredient in the story of Chanukah.

Over 2000 years ago, when the Maccabees liberated Israel from the reign of the Syrian-Greek Empire, they rekindled the mitzvah of having an eternally lit altar.² In this era, oil was the catalyst for lighting candles. In the aftermath of the Temple being desecrated, the Maccabees could only salvage one jug of pure olive oil from the wreckage and ruins. They set out right away to produce more oil to keep the flame alive, and upon their return eight days later, they were surprised to see the flame burning. As the oil lasted for eight days, so too does our delicious oily diet.

A common theme in Judaism is to enhance the spiritual with the physical. Some examples of this include heightening the connectivity to the holiness of Shabbos by wearing fancy clothes or eating a meal with physical rituals, such as blessing the challah, to enhance the spirituality of the day of rest. On Chanukah, we embody this by utilizing the miraculous oil in everyday activities, such as eating.

We fill our physical bodies with physical oily foods in order to feel closer to the miracle. This physical connection we make to the holiday enables us to further enhance our connection to the spirituality of the holiday of Chanukah.

References:

1 "Hanukkah 2019: All the Food That's Eaten during the Jewish Festival of Lights," The Independent, Dec. 22, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/hanukkah-2019-food-jewish-festival-CHANUKAH-doughnuts-potato-latkes-beef-bris-ket-a9242836.html>.

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There is more than one tradition in Judaism to light lights. I will discuss and contrast three such traditions here: the Shabbat candles, the Havdalah candle, and the Chanukah candles.

The difference between them is that Shabbat candles, which are lit indoors, represent *shalom bayit*, meaning "peace in the home." They are like Judaism's inner light, so to speak, or the light of the sanctity of marriage and the holiness of home.

The Chanukah candles used to be lit outdoors. More specifically, the menorah was placed on the left side of the front entrance while the mezuzah was on the right, ensuring that one would be surrounded by *mitzvot*. It was only the fear of persecution that took the Chanukah candles back indoors. From then on, many started following the custom of lighting the menorah by an inner doorway. However, in recent times, the Lubavitcher Rebbe introduced the custom of lighting giant menorahs in public outdoor places, to bring back the original spirit of the day. Publicly displaying the menorah is so important since we, as Jews, must not only light up our

house—as we do with the Shabbat candles—but we have the additional responsibility to illuminate the “outside.” Chanukah candles are the light Judaism brings to the world when we are unafraid to announce our identity in public, live by our principles, and fight, if necessary, for our freedom.

As for the Havdalah candle, which is always made up of several wicks woven together, it represents the fusion of the two; the inner light of Shabbat, joined with the outer light we achieve when we go out into the world and live our faith in public.

When we live as Jews, both in private *and* in public, we not only fill our homes with light, but we bring the light of hope to others as well. As Rabbi Levi Dubov once said, “We can tackle darkness and evil with the light of just one little candle. We add one more each night as if we are adding to our efforts to bring more good deeds into this world. Today, our non-Jewish neighbors have respect for Jews who are proud of their religion.”

Stacy Gittleman, “The mitzvah of displaying a Chanukah menorah publicly,” *The Jewish News*, November 15, 2017. <https://thejewishnews.com/2017/11/15/mitzvah-displaying-CHANUKAH-menorah-publicly/>

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When the world was created, “the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). At the time the story of Chanukah took place, the Jewish people under Syrian-Greek rule also experienced a sense of darkness and despair. They struggled to survive, as their lives were filled with oppression and hardship.

This sense of anguish isn’t as foreign of a concept to us as it might have been a year ago. We can notice a parallel between the state of the world in the beginning of its Creation, the state of the Jewish people under Syrian-Greek rule at the time of the story of Chanukah, and the

state of the world today. Today, our lives are also dark, whether it’s literal darkness and emptiness from the absence of headlights on what used to be busy highways, or figurative darkness and emptiness from the absence of human connection in what used to be our busy and social lives.

As we’ve all heard in countless instances throughout this pandemic, we are living in unprecedented times. But that doesn’t mean we have not gone through similar trials before. Our world as well as specifically the Jewish people have seen affliction and tribulation, yet we’re still here today. Coping during a pandemic, or in battle like the Maccabees, requires resilience, persistence, and positivity.

We can learn from the Maccabees that with unwavering faith, there is always light to outshine the darkness. Though there seems to be no solution or remedy in sight, we can rely on our faith that G-d will give us light, just as He did in the Creation of the world and just as He does for the eight bright days of Chanukah.

Until then, we need to create our own light. As the Maccabees did with the last drop of oil, we need to cherish what we still have left. Though separated by screens, we still have each other—and we will get through this together.

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Chanukah is a holiday that consists of delicious food, storytelling, and games. One of the most common games played is dreidel. This game originated as a way for Jewish individuals to learn Hebrew in secret, after Jewish religious worship was banned by King Antiochus IV in 175 BCE. The bans included Jewish practices such as circumcision, Shabbat observance, and Torah learning. When a Greek official came close to Jewish children studying Torah, the children would hide their books and scrolls and pull out these dreidels, or “spinning tops” to claim they were

just playing games, when in reality they were continuing to learn Hebrew and Torah.

Despite the most common reason, there are several rabbis who have developed alternative numerical explanations for the dreidel game. Each letter on the dreidel also represents a number. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira said the sum of *nun*, *gimel*, *hey*, and *shin* on the dreidel is 358, which is also the sum of the Hebrew letters in the word *nachash*, meaning “serpent.” This refers to the snake that seduced Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden. It is also the same numerical value as the word “Messiah” in Hebrew. This could mean that the dreidel represents that the evil inclination and exile throughout the generations will be transformed into the coming of the Messiah.

Today, children play dreidel as a way to remember the great miracle that happened on Chanukah. The four letters on the dreidel form an acronym for *Nes gadol hayah sham*, or “A great miracle happened there.” In Israel, the dreidel’s letter *shin* is replaced with the letter *pei*, which stands for the word “here,” since the great miracle happened in Israel. The game of dreidel is full of meaning and provides much recollection of our history!

It is a tradition in my family for my cousins and me to play dreidel every year on Chanukah. We often get together once during the eight days of Chanukah and sit in the living room to play dreidel. Most of the time, we use blue and white M&Ms to represent the *gelt* or money used in dreidel games. This way, after the game, we can eat our delicious M&Ms. This game is a time for us to have fun while being slightly competitive. It is a tradition that I know will go on for the rest of our lives and it is one I see our future generations participating in.

Sources:

Yehuda Shurpin, “Why Do We Play with a Dreidel (Top) on Chanukah?” [chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/255909/jewish/Why-Do-We-Play-), https://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/255909/jewish/Why-Do-We-Play-

Why Do Jews Play Dreidel on Hanukkah? my-jewishlearning.com. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/why-do-jews-play-dreidel-on-hanukkah/>

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For a nation that has seen the splitting of the Red Sea, the Plagues of Egypt, and the gifting of the Torah, the miracle of the cruse of oil is certainly on par with the biggest miracles the Jewish people have experienced.

Despite the miraculous nature of the holiday, many might think that there is little to be celebrated about it. Oil lasting for eight days rather than one is an unmatched phenomenon, but should we hold Chanukah to the same standard as our other *chagim* (Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, etc.)?

My initial thought on the matter was “absolutely not!” The miracle that the Maccabees witnessed happened after our people were given the Torah. It seems that by default, we can never hold the Festival of Lights to the same level of importance as we do with our other holy *chagim*.

The boundaries of G-d’s knowledge and reach have no limitations—this is why the Torah has served as “the blueprint of creation.” As cited in an article by Chabad in 2013, there is evidence to support several allusions made to Chanukah in the Torah. Among the examples Rochel Chein includes in her article,* my personal favorite was the fact that the twenty-fifth word in the Torah is אור (light). As Chein points out, it is certainly no coincidence that we begin lighting our *menorot* on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev. Another fact included by Chein that further supports Chanukah’s importance was the twenty-fifth place where the Jews camped on their way from Egypt to the Land of Israel. Chashmonah—the area where they rested—alludes to the family of Chashmonaim who helped lead the Maccabee armies in

their battle against the Greeks.

While the holiday is never specifically mentioned in the Torah, the carefully placed allusions made to it in the Torah prove the importance of Chanukah. This evidence speaks volumes about how we as a nation should go about celebrating the holiday. Chanukah might not possess the sacredness of Yom Kippur, carry the emotional weight of Tishah B’Av, or (debatable) have the yummy treats of Shavuot, but we must celebrate the holiday with our utmost spirit and respect because it is still a chapter in the illustrious history of our nation.

* Rochel Chein, “Is Chanukah Mentioned in the Torah?” chabad.org. https://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/610029/jewish/Is-Chanukah-Mentioned-in-the-Torah.htm

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As the holidays continue, we all celebrate in different ways. I have always thought the food was the best part of any holiday. Fried food is always such a delight, and the fact that those foods are especially available during Chanukah is amazing. The fried foods we tend to eat at Chanukah are latkes and jelly donuts.

This tradition has its origins from when the Temple in Jerusalem was ransacked, and only one day’s worth of menorah oil was available. They used the last of the pure olive oil, which was only enough to last one night, and the oil ended up lasting eight days. This miracle of oil explains why these delicious fried foods are eaten in celebration: they are fried in oil to commemorate the Chanukah miracle.

Emma Hoch

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Every year, my family and I make latkes during Chanukah. Similar to most families, this tradition is something that we always look forward to. Every year, the excitement comes from the delicious taste of the latkes, but what makes me even more excited is watching others enjoy them as well. It is the satisfaction from a latke that is perfectly crispy outside and soft inside, best shared with friends and family.

Chanukah is a holiday in which we celebrate the miracle of G-d giving us exactly what we need at just the right time. There seemed to be enough pure olive oil for the menorah for only one day, but the oil actually lasted for eight days and nights. Despite the fears that things wouldn’t work out, the Jews had faith in G-d, lit the menorah, and the oil miraculously lasted until new oil was ready to be used. G-d gave us exactly what we needed, right when we needed it most.

There are times in our lives when we are tired. There are times in our lives when we think we do not have what it takes, when we think that everything will collapse around us, when we stand over a hot stove, working with hot oil, our eyes stinging from smoke and tearing from onions, but what we do—what Chanukah means for us—is that we continue making the latkes, lighting the menorah, and celebrating the strength, the beauty, and the joy that make up our faith.

On Chanukah, our goal is to continue to have faith and to not be fearful about the places where we feel threatened. So this Chanukah, spend time with family. Eat the latkes. Have the faith to push all fears aside and to embrace the light and latkes.

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The story of Chanukah, although not in the Torah, actually has a lot to do with the observance and commitment to the religious Scriptures. We often see commercialization of Chanukah alongside Christmas. Although celebrated as the most secular and mainstream of our holidays, Chanukah still contains a deep message that can be explained, concerning the war against the Greeks and the candles on the menorah.

Let's start with a little bit of history...

Around 198 BC, Antiochus III took control of Judea, the land that is now Israel. Things were peaceful, as Jews were able to continue their traditions without being forced into religious oppression. After he died, his son, Antiochus IV, took control.

As politics changed, oppression began, bribes were made during elections, and crimes against Jews were committed.

When King Antiochus IV left for war in Egypt, many thought he died. People saw this opportunity to fight back against bribery, control, and corruption from Greek authority. When Antiochus IV surprisingly returned, he stopped the riots by writing new laws. Jews could no longer celebrate Shabbat, circumcise, pray in synagogue, or even study Torah. This resulted in war against the brave, Jewish Maccabees.

At this point, you all know the rest of the story. The war was fought, the Jews won, study continued, and the menorah's flame burned for eight amazing nights. The menorah had seven candles. One of the seven represented the light of the Torah. The other six were representative of other wisdoms. The reason why the light of

the Torah shines bright alongside the other candles is that the Torah is necessary guidance that makes use of the other values.

What's important to note about the war, and the menorah, is that all of the fighting occurred for the sake of preserving Jewish customs and Torah learning. The entire story of Chanukah is not just to acknowledge the miracle of the oil. It's about defending our identities and finding great educational value in our holiest scroll. It is believed that moral alignment—insight provided by the Torah—must be paired with human intellect to better a society.

Today, we have extra candles for the eight nights, but we still have that one higher candle used to light all the others. Torah lights the path toward a moral lifestyle. Chanukah illuminates the importance of the Torah.

Chag Chanukah Sameach!