

Chanuka Activities for Families

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Eight Conversations for Eight Nights

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It has often been observed that Chanuka shares a root with chinuch (education). In fact, the stories and halachot of Chanuka are rich with opportunities for robust educational conversation both in school and at home.

Each night, families have a tremendous “teachable moment” while sitting by the chanukia. Conversations about themes in Chanuka can help families address topics and share values that sometimes get neglected in the rush of day-to-day life.

1. Making the Effort

After the Maccabees defeated the Syrian-Greeks, and wanted to rededicate the Beit Hamikdash, they famously discovered that they only had enough oil to last for one day, when producing more oil would take eight days. Though the oil was not enough to last, they lit the menorah anyway. They did the best they could.

- Have you ever started something that you didn't think would succeed?
- Why should we try our best if we are sure that we will not succeed?

[Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but you are not free to abstain from it either." (Mishna Avot, 2:16)

- How does Rabbi Tarfon's wisdom apply to the Maccabim?
- If we don't finish the work, who will? Who “finished the work” of keeping the menorah lit?

2. Miracles in our Day

On Chanuka, we remember and express our gratitude for two miracles. The miracle of the oil—one day's worth lasting for eight days—was an act of Hashem suspending the laws of nature. The miracle of the military victory—the few defeating the many—was within the laws of nature.

- Do we still experience miracles today? If so, are they supernatural, or within the laws of nature?
- Do you think the establishment of the State of Israel was miraculous? Why or why not?
- Did you ever have a personal experience that felt miraculous? If so, what was it? Did you express gratitude?

3. The Few Against the Many: Overcoming the Odds

The story of the war between the Maccabim and the Syrian-Greeks is an illustration of how a few brave and strong people, with the help of Hashem, can defeat an overwhelming force.

- Do you ever feel like the odds are stacked against you? To whom do you turn for help?
- What characteristics do you think the Maccabim had that helped them defeat the Syrian-Greeks?
- Have you ever overcome a challenge? How did you do it? How did it feel?

4. Counting Up: Chanuka as a Model for Growth

The gemara relates that Hillel and Shammai argued over the correct method for lighting the chanukia. According to Shammai, one begins with eight candles, lighting one fewer each night. According to Hillel, one begins with one candle, lighting one more each night. One reason given for Hillel's position is that we should increase in holiness.

- If you were deciding how to light the chanukia, what are some different ways you might do it and why?
- What message do you think it would send if we decreased the number of candles each night? How would that change our Chanuka celebration?
- What does it mean to “increase in holiness” and how can we do it?
- How could our method for lighting the chanukia be a model for personal growth?

5. Resisting Peer Pressure: How the Maccabim Embraced Being Different

The Syrian-Greeks sought to destroy the Jews by outlawing Jewish practices. Many Jews assimilated, becoming indistinguishable from the Greeks around them. The Maccabim resisted tremendous pressure to conform, and retained both their Jewish practice and their Jewish pride.

- When it seems like everyone is doing the wrong thing, how do you do what's right?
- What are some things that we might be pressured to do even though we know they are wrong?
- How can we be prepared to respond to peer pressure?

6. Pirsum HaNes: Being a Show Off

The Rambam teaches in Hilchot Chanuka that we should light our chanukia in a window or doorway since its purpose is to publicize the miracle.

- When do we want to attract attention and show off? When not?
- What are the right things to show off? What should be kept more private?
- Have you ever felt reluctant to advertise your Judaism?

7. All those Presents!

Recently, exchanging gifts has become an important part of many families' Chanuka celebration. Sometimes, this results in excitement and joy. Sometimes, it causes jealousy and greed.

- Why do we give gifts on Chanuka?
- How can we make gift-giving part of the spiritual message of Chanuka?
- What is the best gift you ever received?
- If you could give a gift to your whole family/school/community, what would it be?

8. Enjoying the Moment

We are halachically forbidden to *use* the lights of the chanukia for anything. We may not use them to do homework, check a Blackberry, or wash dishes. We are supposed to enjoy their light. There is a widespread custom (especially among women) to refrain from work for at least the first half hour that the chanukia lights burn.

- As a family, do we find enough time to stop and enjoy? Are we too busy?
- Does everything have to have a "use" or is it good to have things just to appreciate?

Eight Nights of Gratitude

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Chanuka is a time of joy and singing Hallel. One way to help children (and adults!) tap into that joy, on a personal level, is to create an awareness of the *brachot* in our lives for which we can feel grateful. The activity that follows is designed so that children and parents take the time to think about and articulate their gratitude, not only for the gifts that they may receive on Chanuka, but also for the many intangible gifts that permeate their lives.

This activity is designed for grades 4-6, but is easily adaptable for both older and younger children.

Materials: Poster paper, Construction paper, Markers, Scissors and Glue

Discussion

What are we grateful for? Ask children to share both tangible and intangible things. Encourage them to use descriptive language to flesh out their responses. For example, instead of "I am grateful for a house and my family," they can articulate "I am grateful for a warm, safe home, and for the love and care of my family." Parents are certainly welcome to articulate their gratitude as well.

Activity

- 1) Families should draw a *chanukiya* on the poster board, leaving room for the flames on top. Make your *chanukiya* as elaborate or as simple as you like.
- 2) Children cut eight "flames" out of construction paper, and write one thing for which they are grateful on each. (The *shamash* can be illustrated as a flame, or can carry the title of your family project).
- 3) Each night of Chanuka, a member of the family chooses a flame to read and add on to their *chanukiya* poster. The family can discuss the subject of gratitude together.

The Hidden Miracles of Chanuka

Rabbi Ouriel Hazan

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Many teachers and parents tend to focus their attention on the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days, with seemingly good reason. The story of the Chashmonaim finding the one, lone kosher jug of oil which then lasted eight days, is a story filled with wonder, excitement, drama and hope. However, by focusing our children's attention on the outward miracle of Chanuka, we are neglecting an important aspect of Chanuka. By simply refocusing their attention to the hidden miracles of narrative of Chanuka, we can expose them to a new and profound message.

[We thank you also] **for the miracles, the redemption, the mighty deeds, and the victories in battle which you performed for our ancestors in those days, at this time.**

In the days of Mattityahu, son of Yochanan, the High Priest, the Chashmonai, and his sons, the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will. But You in Your great compassion stood by them in time of their distress. You fought their battles, judged their claim, and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the arrogant into the hands of those who were engaged in the study of Your Torah. You made for Yourself a great and holy name in Your world, and for Your people Israel You performed a great salvation and redemption to this very day. Then Your children entered the holiest part of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courts, and instituted these eight days of Chanuka for giving thanks and praise to your great name.

על הנסים, ועל הפרקו, ועל הגבורות, ועל התשועות, ועל המלחמות, שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה. בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול, חשמונאי ובניו, כשעמדה מלכות יון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשכיחם תורתך, ולהעבירם מחקי רצונך, ואתה ברחמיך הרבים עמדת להם בעת צרתם, רבת את ריבם, הגנת את דינם, נקמת את נקמתם, מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים, ורבים ביד מעטים, וטמאים ביד טהורים, ורשעים ביד צדיקים, וזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך. ואתה עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך, ולעמך ישראל עשית תשועה גדולה ופרקו כהיום הזה. ואחר כן באו בגי' לך ביר ביתך, ופנו את היכלך, וטהרו את מקדשך, והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך, וקבעו שמונת ימי חנכה אלו, להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול.

Questions for family exploration and discussion

1. What is the miracle of Chanuka described in this *tefilla*?
2. Why do you think the miracle of the oil lasting eight days is not mentioned?
3. How do we know that it is miraculous that we won the war? (Hint: Look at the underlined section.)
4. Can you think of another instance in Tanakh when the weak defeated the strong?

Activities

Families can choose from a number of activities to help visualize the war and reinforce the scope of the miracle.

I. Visualizing the Setting

Supplies:

Computer with internet access

Activity:

Google images of Yehuda and Shomron (Judea and Samaria). Notice how the area is full of hills and valleys, nooks and crannies. How might this make fighting a war harder? Easier?

II. The Many vs. The Few

Supplies:

- Bag of marbles or Israeli couscous
- Kitchen tongs
- Ramp/ sloped surface (such as a binder)

Activity:

Families can discuss how difficult it would be for a few Chashmonaim to defeat a large army. To reinforce this idea, parents should equip their child/ren with kitchen tongs, and release bags of marbles representing the many Greek soldiers down the ramp. Children must try and catch as many of the “Greek” marbles as possible as they come tumbling down the ramp. The children will see how difficult it is to catch marbles during the onslaught and will understand how improbable the odds of 1-1000 were. Parents and children can then switch roles, and see if the parents can do any better at catching marbles!

III. Surprising Victory

Supplies:

- Gallon size Ziploc bag
- 1 cup water (representing the Greeks)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil (representing the Chashmonaim)

Activity:

Children should predict/hypothesize what will happen when the amount of water is mixed with the small amount of oil. Children can start with the Chashmonaim symbolized by the olive oil, poured into the bottom of the bag. Parents should explain that the olive oil at the bottom of the bag represents the Jews in Israel before the Greeks took over. The water that will be added to the bags represents the onslaught of Greek military presence in Israel. Children can then be instructed to add the water and shake the bag, observing the tumult the oil undergoes. At the end, parents and children will be able to observe and discuss that the Chashmonaim, like the oil, were able to rise together, victoriously, to the top.