

The Experience of Chanukah

Ms. Gaby Schoenfeld

Assistant Director of Experiential Jewish Education, YU Center for the Jewish Future

When most people think about experiential Jewish education (also referred to in some settings as “informal” Jewish education), they typically think about youth movements, camp, Israel trips and other immersive experiences all classically thought of as the Jewish education that happens “outside of the classroom.” In the YU Certificate Program in Experiential Jewish Education (EJE), we define experiential Jewish education as: “The deliberate infusion of Jewish values and content into engaging and memorable experiences that impact the formation of Jewish identity.” To that end, experiential Jewish education must be content and value-driven, guiding learners toward possible outcomes, and must be delivered through experiences that enable learners to authentically experience, reflect, conceptualize, and experiment with what they have learned. In other words, EJE must allow for self-exploration, whether the experience takes place outside *or* inside the classroom.

We are fortunate in Judaism that our rituals, traditions, history, and calendar are ripe with moments and opportunities for creating and facilitating these types of learning experiences. We are also privileged that we as educators have at our fingertips a rich reservoir of sources, material and content to work with in order to help our learners have positive Jewish educational experiences. In addition to having these experiences for experiences’ sake, though, it is one of our primary goals as educators to use these experiences to help impact the formation of our learners’ Jewish identities through various methodologies. This article will demonstrate several ways in which we can use Chanukah as a platform to impact our learners’ Jewish identities using some of these tools including:

1. Building in reflection
2. Introducing conflict
3. Sensory education
4. Driving content with values

Chanukah presents us with a perfect opportunity for experiential education that impacts identity formation. At the heart of Chanukah is the idea or actually the law of “*pirsumei nissa*” or publicizing the miracle of Chanukah:

For this reason, (the miracle of Chanukah) the rabbis of that generation instituted that these eight days, which begin on the night of the 25th of Kislev, are days of happiness and praise and the candles are lit each night of the eight days at the entrance of the doorways in order to display and reveal the miracle.

Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 3:3

ומפני זה התקינו חכמים שבאותו הדור שיהיו שמונת הימים האלו שתחלתן מליל חמשה ועשרים בכסלו ימי שמחה והלל ומדליקין בהן הנרות בערב על פתחי הבתים בכל לילה ולילה משמונת הלילות להראות ולגלות הנס. רמב"ם, הלכות חנוכה ג:ג

We learn here that the establishment of having the “days of happiness and praise” was to not only celebrate and give our gratitude to Hashem for the miracle of the eight days of the menorah being lit in the Temple but also to “display and reveal the miracle,” presumably to others—i.e. to make a public display. This law has deep implications for the impact on one’s Jewish identity for according to this, it is not enough that we light the menorah in our own homes, but that also we make it public.

We find this cited explicitly in at least three places:

1. The *Shulchan Aruch*, when codifying the laws of Chanukah, tells us that the ideal time for lighting candles is the time when people are still coming home from the marketplace (i.e. that there are still a lot of people out in public walking around):

One may not light the Chanukah candles before sundown, but rather with the end of sundown. One should not light earlier or later. There is an opinion that if one is busy, one may light as early as plag hamincha (approximately the last tenth of the day) as long as one places in the candles enough oil to last until traffic ceases in the marketplace.

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 672:1

אין מדליקין נר חנוכה קודם שתשקע החמה אלא עם סוף שקיעתה לא מאחרים ולא מקדימים. ויש מי שאומר שאם הוא טרוד יכול להקדים מפלג המנחה ולמעלה ובלבד שיתן בה שמן עד שתכלה רגל מן השוק.
שלחן ערוך, אורח חיים תרעב:א

2. The Gemara in *Shabbos* 21b, talks about the mitzvah of not only lighting in public, but of actually lighting outside of one’s home:

Our rabbis taught: the mitzvah involves placing it at the door of one’s home on the outside. If one lives in an attic, one should light in the window closest to the public thoroughfare and in times of danger, it is sufficient to light on one’s table.

ת"ר נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ אם היה דר בעלייה מניחה בחלון הסמוכה לרה"ר ובשעת הסכנה מניחה על שלחנו ודיו.

Rashi, s.v. "*Mebachutz*," explicitly says this is because of *pirsumei nissa*, and this is subsequently cited by *Mishna Berura* 671:21.

3. The Gemara in *Shabbos* also explains that there is a minimum and maximum height requirement and Rashi explains that anything higher than 20 amos wouldn't be recognizable (presumably as a chanukiah) and would thus lose the point of *pirsumei nissa*, which would invalidate the lighting:

If a Chanukah candle was placed above twenty amos it is invalid.

Gemara, Shabbos 22a

It is invalid—Because people don’t look above twenty amos and the miracle is not publicized.

Rashi, Shabbos 22a

נר של חנוכה שהניחה למעלה מעשרים אמה פסולה.
שבת כב.

פסולה - דלא שלטא בה עינא למעלה מעשרים אמה, וליכא פרסומי ניסא.
רש"י, שבת כב.

These sources teach us that we have to light our candles at an hour when many people are outside and bustling about, that we should light them in a public place—actually outside—and that we must adhere to a specific placement of the candles so as to make sure that people know exactly what it is and what it represents.

By adhering to these halachos, we are letting it be known to anyone who passes by our home that not only do we celebrate Chanukah, but that we are Jewish. We are commanded—for at least these eight nights—to make it publicly known that we are Jewish to as broad an audience as possible.

For most Orthodox children who presumably live in neighborhoods and communities that are predominantly Jewish and often likely Orthodox, this can be an exciting opportunity for them to display their Judaism. They can openly express all that it represents on Chanukah, such as our triumph over the Greeks and our reclamation of the Beis HaMikdash, in a very public way; it is an opportunity for them—through displaying their chanukiot in a window or in Israel, literally outside—to declare to the world: “I am Jewish and I am proud to be Jewish.”

This public display of Jewish identity that springs from the centrality of *pirsumei nissa*, to the celebration and fulfillment of the ritual laws of Chanukah, is only the first step of the experience for our learners. [Learner can also refer to children learning from their parents as the home plays a major role in a child’s educational development.] In experiential Jewish education, we want to make sure that our learners not only experience something powerful, but also to reflect on their experience in order to contemplate it in a new light. To that end, we should encourage our learners, upon lighting their chanukiot in a public place, to reflect on this experience by asking them to stop and answer: “How did you feel when lighting your chanukiah? How do you feel when someone walks by your home and sees your chanukiah lit in your window?” Hopefully their answers will be positive: “proud, happy, excited to be Jewish, etc...”

In order to help them consider what it might be like to have a different experience of Chanukah than their own, you could then introduce a conflict (a tool that we use often in EJE). Ask them to consider what it might be like for Jews who live in places where displaying Jewish identity (through acts such as lighting a chanukiah in a public place, wearing a kippa and/or tzitzis, or having a mezuzah on your door) is not safe or is even dangerous. Modern examples of this include Jews living in anti-Semitic places in France or other parts of Europe and Jews who lived under Communist regimes in the former Soviet Union, where Jewish identity was so stifled that entire generations of Jews were not told they were Jewish until after Communism fell, for fear that they would be killed if anyone knew.

These examples paint a very different picture of what Jewish identity can look like depending on something so simple as where you live, and could also affect how you are able to fulfill your ritual obligation on Chanukah of *pirsumei nissa*. What happens if one lives in a place where *pirsumei nissa* could endanger one’s life? As we saw earlier, the Gemara teaches us that if your life is in danger, then you can and should light inside.

In fact, it is the experiences of those Jews who could not light outside or in public out of fear and danger for their lives who have impacted our current day *pirsumei nissa* customs. This is the reason why most Jews today (with the exception of those living in Israel) light inside, even in places that are considered “safe” for Jews—such as most places in the United States. Jewish authorities who lived in safe places have wondered why the practice has not reverted back to lighting outside. R. Yitzchak of Vienna (c. 1180-1250) states:

Nowadays, when there is no danger, I am not sure why we don't light in

והאידנא דליכא סכנה לא
ידענא מאי טעמא אין אנו

Even though the halacha adapted its standard of *pirsumei nissa* for those living in extenuating circumstances, and in fact most Jews today continue to light inside, I would ask, “How does having to light inside and perhaps away from a window or public space affect one’s Jewish identity?” Would it make someone feel as if he or she has not fully celebrated Chanukah or fulfilled his obligations? Could it have a negative impact on the formation of that person’s Jewish identity? These questions can help use Chanukah as an opportunity for learners to explore important questions around Jewish identity—both theirs and that of their peers (who they might never meet or know) who live in other places around the world and who must celebrate Chanukah in a very different way from them. Asking your learners to think about Jewish identity from a different perspective will enable them to understand and appreciate their own experience in a deeper and more nuanced way.

In addition to using a conflict and reflection to help learners have a deeper engagement with content, another methodology used in experiential Jewish education emphasizes the use of sensory education in creating experiences (enhancing or reducing the use of the five senses: smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight). The rituals that we have developed as a community to celebrate Chanukah incorporate several elements of sensory education in a very distinctive way: we enhance taste by eating certain foods that specifically taste like oil (potato latkes and *sufganiyot*); we reduce our sight by lighting our chanukiot in the dark (at night or turning off the lights if lighting inside) so that our eyes can focus on the burning of the oil and on the light that was lit in the Beis HaMikdash (literally, and that took us from the darkness of our oppression to the light of our freedom, metaphorically); and we enhance sound by singing loudly the songs of Chanukah such as *Maoz Tzur* and *Al Hanissim*, and by singing *Hallel* each day.

Finally, a fourth way in which Chanukah presents opportunities for experiential Jewish education is through the values that we strive to impart through this chag. First, we emphasize the value of gratitude—most explicitly we give gratitude to Hashem for giving us the miracle of defeating the Greeks and helping us to restore the Temple by having the oil last for eight nights. We explicitly demonstrate this gratitude through *pirsumei nissa* (lighting our chanukiot in the right place and at the right time), in addition to reciting *Hallel*, reading Torah each day, and reciting *Al Hanissim*. A second value that we strive to impart is that of giving *tzedakah*, which we demonstrate by giving out Chanukah *gelt* which we then might encourage our children or learners to donate a portion to a charity of their choice or to those in the community who cannot afford to buy their own Chanukah lights, chanukiot, etc.

As we can see, Chanukah is rife with opportunities for us to create meaningful educational experiences that can help our learners to explore their Jewish identities through a multi-sensory and content-driven approach. It is the responsibility of educators and parents to seize these opportunities and truly bring the values of Chanukah to light.

I would like to express tremendous hakaras hatov to my brother-in-law, Jonah Mermelstein (YC '13), for his help in locating potential mekoros for this piece.