

8 Conversations for 8 Nights

A Chanuka Activity for Families

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?



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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?
- Did 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.

- Why would we not light all eight candles the first night, but gradually add one candle each night?
- 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 bullies might try to do to make us do things we know 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, read a book, 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?

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