

Celebrating in Times of Crisis

Framing this unit

In this activity, we will have the opportunity to reflect on how the circumstances might affect our ability to celebrate, both on a practical and spiritual level. Using the Chanukiah as a case study, we will discuss what values we are celebrating on Chanukah, and explore the rules regarding lighting Chanukah candles in times of danger. We will also learn texts that address ways to maintain hope and routine life, despite difficulties.

What are we celebrating on Chanukah?

Chanukah marks the victory of the Hasmoneans (also known as the Maccabees) in the revolt against the Hellenistic Empire during the Second Temple period. The Hasmonean victory provided a number of reasons for celebration: It brought about the end of the decrees imposed by the Hellenists against observance of the Jewish commandments and the purification of the Temple once more allowed the free practice of a Jewish way of life. This rededication of the Temple is likely the source of the holiday's name - Chanukah meaning "dedication" in Hebrew. In addition, the end of Greek rule restored Jewish rule, another cause for celebration.

The most well-known explanation for the holiday and why it lasts eight days, however, is the famous story of the miracle of the cruse of oil. According to this story, upon entering the Temple, the Hasmoneans found only one cruse, or jug, of pure oil that would ordinarily have sufficed to light the Temple Menorah for only one night, yet it miraculously lasted for eight.

Chanukah Candle Lighting

Lighting eight candles is the holiday's main commandment. To spread the word about the miracle, the menorah, also called a Chanukiah, is placed at the entrance to the house or in a window. The commandment is fulfilled by lighting only one candle each evening, but it is customary to light an additional candle on each of the holiday's nights. Hence, on the first evening, one candle is lit, on the second evening—two candles, and so on, until on the last evening eight candles are lit. Chanukah candles cannot be used for lighting or transferring fire. It is therefore customary to light another candle (the shamash) for this purpose and distinguish it from the other eight candles

Placing the Chanukiah

Lighting a Chanukiah is a commandment that includes two aspects: internal and external. Internally, the commandment to light a Chanukiah is assigned to each household unit ("ner ish ubeito"), so one family member can fulfill the obligation by lighting for the entire family. Another aspect of lighting a Chanukiah is publicizing the miracle of Chanukah to the outside world, exhibiting the Chanukiah externally ("pirsum ha-nes"). This becomes more problematic in times of danger or in hostile surroundings.

It is in times of crisis that we might ask ourselves, to what degree do we need to keep the external layer of this commandment. One of Judaism's foundational values is human life, and so we are obligated not to put ourselves in harm's way and to stay safe as best we can. We will look at some primary sources and texts that reflect different periods and through them we will dive into these questions.

Lighting Chanukah Candles



[Drawing by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Germany, 1890's.](#)

This postcard shows the lighting of a Chanukah lamp (Chanukiah). The scene takes place inside a living room, in which people are playing chess and cards. The children are playing with a dreidel.

Das Licht - oder Weihefest (Chanuka), Moritz Oppenheim, 1899, The Joseph and Margit Hoffman Judaica Postcard Collection, The Folklore Research Center, Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University.



[Lighting Chanukah Candles, Tel Aviv, 1947](#)

A photograph of children lighting Hanukkah candles at the Tel Aviv-Jaffa border. The photograph was published in "Davar Leyeladim" (A weekly Children's newspaper published by Davar) in December 1947, when the battles of the War of Independence were already taking place in Israel.

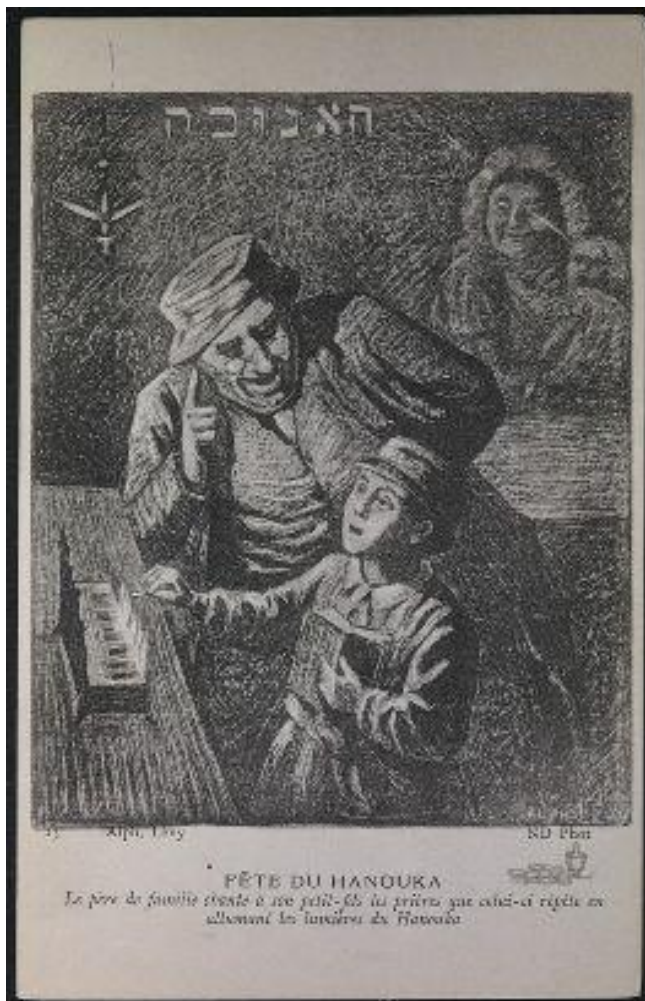
Jewish historical press site founded by the National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University, "Davar for Children", December 18, 1947. Thanks to the Levon Institute (the New Histadrut), which owns the rights to the newspaper "Davar for Children".



Lighting a Chanukiah by Chabad in Tel Aviv, 1983

A photograph of a Chabad member lighting a huge Chanukiah in the public domain, as customary in Israel and in other locations worldwide, in order to celebrate and publicize the miracle of Chanukah.

Photograph by Zvi Roger, 1983, Dan Hadani Collection, The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, The National Library of Israel.



Fête du Hanouka, Alphonse Lévy, 1900's.

A postcard with an illustration depicting a boy blessing while lighting Chanukah candles, under the guidance of his father. In the background, the mother and her baby are seen watching the lighting.

Photograph Collection, The National Library of Israel.

Observe

Look at the primary sources that show Chanukah candle lighting and compare them. Notice where the pictures are taken, what is context or location, and who appears in each picture.

List similarities that appear in some/all of the pictures:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

List some differences between two or more of the pictures:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Analyze

Focus on the historical and geographical context of each one of these pictures and discuss what might be the explanation for the differences you noticed.

Connect

Read the texts below and reflect on the following questions:

1. Where is the Chanukah supposed to be placed and why?
2. What are the considerations when deciding where to place it? What conditions might affect this decision? Why?
3. In Jewish tradition there is a general guideline "Don't rely on miracles". How can we understand this approach in the context of Chanukah today?
4. Have you ever felt the need to be more cautious and not display signs of Jewish identity in public?

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת שבת ל"ב א'

לְעוֹלָם אֵל יַעֲמֵד אָדָם בְּמָקוֹם סִבְבָה וַיֹּאמֶר, שֶׁעוֹשִׂין לוֹ נֶס, שְׂמָא אֵין עוֹשִׂין לוֹ נֶס. וְאִם עוֹשִׂין לוֹ נֶס, מְנַבֵּין לוֹ מִזְבְּחוֹתָיו.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 32a:4

A person should never stand in a place of danger saying that they (God) will perform a miracle for him, lest in the end they do not perform a miracle for him. And, moreover, even if they do perform a miracle for him, they will deduct it from his merits.

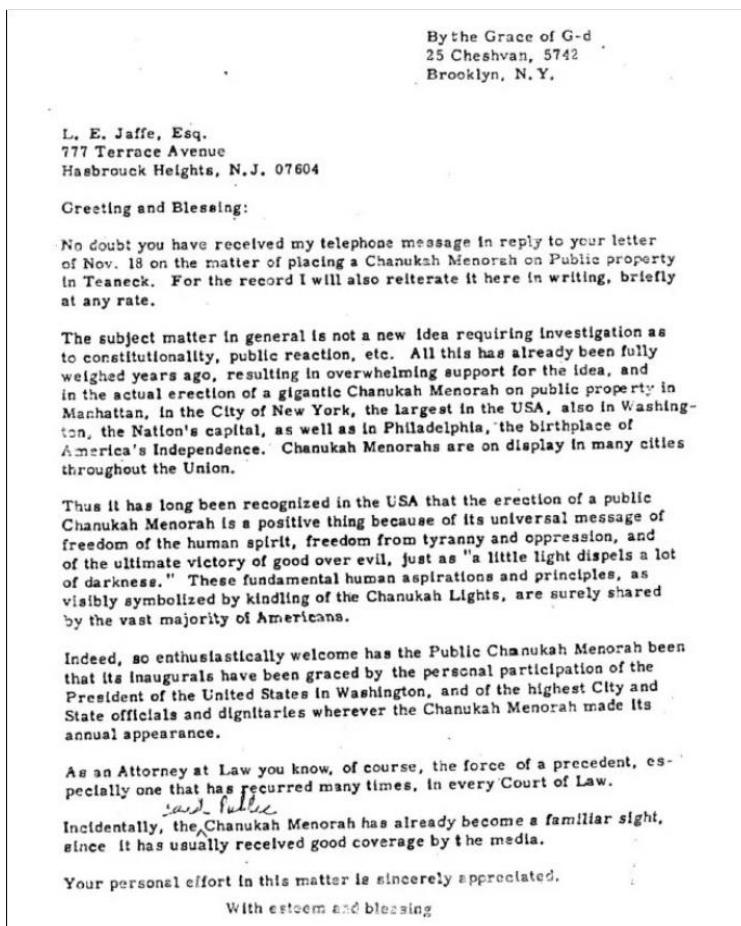
קיצור שולחן ערוך, סימן קלט, סעיף ז

מצות נר חנוכה, להדליק בפתח הסמוך לרשות הרבים, משום פרוסומי נסא, וכך היו עושין בזמן המשנה והגמרא. ובזמן הזה שאם דרים בין האמות, מדליקין בבית שהוא דר בו. ואם יש לו חלון לרשות הרבים, ידליקם שם. ואם לאו, מדליקן אצל הפתח. ומצוה שניחם בטפח הסמוך לפתח משמאל, שתהא מזוזה מימין, ונר חנוכה משמאל, ונמצא שהוא מסבב במצות. ויותר טוב להניחם בחלל הפתח.

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 139:7

It is a mitzvah to light the *Chanukiya* in the doorway that opens to the street, [public domain], in order to publicize the miracle; and it was done in this manner in the days of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Now, since we live among non-Jews, we light the *Chanukiya* in the house, and if you have a window facing the street, you should light it there; if not, you should light it near the door. It is a mitzvah to place the *Chanukiya* within a *tefach* of the left side of the door so that the *mezuzah* will be on the right and the *Chanukah* lights on the left, and in so doing you find yourself surrounded by mitzvot. It is preferable to place the *Chanukiya* within the open space of the door.

[The Importance of a Public Chanukah](#)



In his letter, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, (The Lubavitcher Rebbe) writes:

"Thus, it has been long recognized in the USA that the erection of a public Chanukah Menorah is a positive thing because of its universal message of freedom of the human spirit, freedom from tyranny and oppression, and of the ultimate victory of good over evil, just as "a little light dispels a lot of darkness."

These fundamental human aspirations and principles, as visibly symbolized by [the] kindling of the Chanukah Lights, are surely shared by the vast majority of Americans."

- What does the Chanukah symbolize, according to Rabbi Schneerson?
- Do you agree with his statement, that lighting the Chanukah in the public domain can reflect not only Jewish culture but shared values of society at large?
- In your community, is it customary to light Chanukiyot in the public domain? What are the considerations for doing so or not doing so?

Celebrating in Times of Crisis

- What are the things that strengthen you in times of crisis or difficulty?
- How do you feel about celebrating in such times? Choose one or more of the following adjectives to help describe your sentiment. Consider to what degree you find celebrating in times of crisis: impossible, inappropriate, challenging, reassuring, important, a form of escapism, a way to remain resilient.

Just before the establishment of the State of Israel, tens of thousands of Jews are still in detention camps in Cyprus. Those applicants who were expelled by the British, were waiting for that moment when they could finally immigrate to the Land of Israel. In Israel, the residents and aid organizations such as the JDC ("The Joint") did what they could to make the lives of the refugees as easy as possible, as written in [HaBoker Newspaper, March 30, 1948](#):

"The Committee for the Cyprus Exiles is now preparing, in cooperation with the "Joint", a Passover delivery on behalf of the "Yishuv" (the pre-state Jewish community in Israel) to the exiles in the camps. The delivery will contain fish preserved from the workers' farms, sweet delicacies and Haggadot in a special print. The artistic part of the holiday program will be carried out by Mrs. Shoshana Damari and Mr. Moshe Wilensky."



[Singer Shoshana Damari performing in detention camps in Cyprus, March \(Pesach\), 1948](#)

This bibliographic record is part of the Israel Archive Network project (IAN) and has been made accessible thanks to the collaborative efforts of the The Egged History Center Archive, the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage and the National Library of Israel.

- Why do you think it was important for the Jewish community in Israel to send not only Haggadot and Matzah to the refugees in Cyprus, but also provide festive musical performances?
- Think of an example from your community where celebrations took place despite difficult circumstances. Reflect on what this achieved in terms of morale and keeping high spirits as a community.
- Read the following excerpts from Rabbi Buchdal's Rosh Hashanah Sermon written during the Covid pandemic, and choose one or two sentences that resonate with you.

[Excerpts from Angela Buchdahl's Rosh Hashanah Sermon \(Central Synagogue, NYC\), 2020 \(Sefaria\)](#)

For millennia— we Jews have celebrated the arrival of the new year with 3 words: *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today is the world's birthday! But this year doesn't feel like a typical *birthday* celebration. For one--*It's not much of a party without you all here*. But that's not the only reason. As we approached this milestone with a virus still very much out of control, with deep economic distress and social unrest [...]. The mood this Rosh Hashanah feels more like a birthday you'd rather avoid facing.

[...] But in truth, the literal translation announces: "Today is the *conception* of the world." *Harah* in Hebrew, means conception or pregnancy. In the Jewish tradition, we don't say *mazel tov* or "Congratulations!" when we learn that someone is pregnant. And there's a reason for that. We recognize that there is still a lot of uncertainty and potential for loss between pregnancy and birth. Instead, we say *b'sha'ah tovah*: "In good time." Now that feels like a *truer* translation for this Rosh Hashanah, 5781. We're not yet feeling the joy and celebration of a "birthd ay" but rather, perhaps, the cautious optimism that this new year is pregnant with possibilities for new life and blessing.

But I will be honest, there have been times over this last year when I could not even muster "cautious optimism." I read the news, I look at our half-emptied city, I see the west coast in flames and I feel despondent. Furious. And scared.

[...] But you may have heard the Jewish proverb: "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Ok, it's actually Winston Churchill who is usually credited with saying that, but our tradition anticipated his sentiment by over 3000 years. Because if you know our history, you know that **we Jews were built for crisis**. And if there is one thing I have come to appreciate recently—it's that our texts and liturgy, most which were written during some famine, exile, Crusade, or pogrom, feel like they are speaking to me *more than ever* in this moment. Because, actually, this isn't unprecedented. **We've been here before.**

[...] Over the last 6 months, as the coronavirus made landfall on our shores and waves of this pandemic rippled out from city to city, many of us, the fortunate ones whose lives permitted it, have taken shelter from the storm in our own kind of solitary confinement at home.

I ask you: What have you learned about yourself in this time? How has this crisis forced you to think about what is important? What really matters to you? What are your spiritual anchors when life is uncertain? What have you taken for granted?

In our busy, full lives, it is easy to get tossed from one thing to the next without a chance to pause. To lead an unexamined life. But if this pandemic has shown us anything it is that we should not waste our opportunity, while in the belly of the whale, to take a *deep breath*. That breath—enables an accounting of our soul. So that we can emerge, like Jonah, with a new understanding of our meaning and purpose and God's call to us.

[...] Our city, our nation, our entire world, is in the throes of some serious contractions— Protests and riots, hurricanes and wildfires, and a persistent, insistent virus that has shuttered businesses and taken nearly a *million lives*. We despair because it feels like everything around us *is dying*— our economy, our democracy, our planet. But I believe that the pain and convulsions we are feeling are not the last shudders of death and demise, but the labor pains of a new world, longing to be born.