

Reading Excerpts for Break Out Groups
Rhythms of the Jewish Year: CHANUKAH
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The following readings can be used to support staff in connecting to the underlying messages embedded in Chanukah in order to personally connect to the holiday and generate possibilities for meaningful curriculum explorations.

Prompts

- Read an excerpt. What big ideas of Chanukah can you extract from this reading?
- What does it make you think about in terms of classroom practice, in relationship to Chanukah, and beyond?
- What threads might you explore in the classroom with children and families?

EXCERPT 1

TWENTY-TWO centuries ago, when Israel was under the rule of the empire of Alexander the Great, one particular leader, Antiochus IV, decided to force the pace of Hellenisation. He forbade Jews from practising their religion and even set up a statue of Zeus Olympus in the Beit Hamikdash (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. This was too much to bear, and a group of Jews, the Maccabees, fought for their religious freedom, winning a stunning victory against the most powerful army of the ancient world. After three years of conflict, they reconquered Jerusalem, rededicated the Holy Temple and relit the Menorah with the one cruse of undefiled oil they found among the wreckage. It was one of the most spectacular military achievements of the ancient world. It was, as we say in our prayers, a victory of the few over the many, the weak over the strong. It is summed up in a wonderful line from the Prophet Zechariah: *“Not by might nor by strength but by my spirit says the Lord.”* (Zechariah, 4:6). The Maccabees had neither might nor strength, neither weapons nor numbers. But they had a double portion of the Jewish spirit that longs for freedom and is prepared to fight for it. Never believe that a handful of dedicated people can’t change the world. Inspired by faith, they can. The Maccabees did then. So can we today. [...] The Chanukah lights are the symbol of the survival of the Jewish people and Jewish culture. They represent hope and faith in the future, because even when the situation looked impossibly bleak, the Maccabees refused to give up hope in the future, and fought to triumph over the darkness. Source: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Click [here](#) to access the source. Scroll down to find Chanukah

EXCERPT 2

WHY DID God choose these tiny people for such a great task? [...] Where did Jewish strength lie if not in numbers? The Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. God tells Moshe/Moses: Do not count Jews. Ask them to give, and then count the contributions. In terms of numbers we are small. But in terms of our contributions, we are vast. When it comes to making a contribution, numbers do not count. What matters is commitment, passion, dedication to a cause. Precisely because we are so small as a people, every one of us counts. We each make a difference to the fate of Judaism and the Jewish people. *(We each make a difference to the people we come in contact with and in our community.)*

Source: *Ten Paths to God, Unit 10: Responsibility* (www.RabbiSacks.org/TenPaths)

ChanukahQuote:

“There are two ways of spreading the light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”-Edith Wharton

EXCERPT 3

The Light of War and the Light of Peace.

There is a law about Chanukah I find moving and profound. Rambam writes that the commandment of lighting the Chanukah lights is very precious [...]. The question then arises: What if, on a Friday afternoon, you find yourself with only one candle? Should you light it as a Shabbat candle or a Chanukah one? It can't be both. Logic suggests that you should light it as a Chanukah candle. After all, there is no law that you have to sell or borrow to light lights for Shabbat. Yet the law is, surprisingly, that when faced with such a choice, you light your only candle as a *Shabbat* light. Why? Listen to Rambam: 'The Shabbat light takes priority because it symbolises *shalom bayit*, peace in the home. And great is peace because the entire Torah was given in order to make peace in the world.'

Consider: Chanukah commemorates one of the greatest military victories in Jewish history. Yet Jewish law rules that if we can only light one candle - the Shabbat light takes precedence, because in Judaism the greatest military victory takes second place to peace in the home. Why did Judaism, alone among the civilisations of the ancient world, survive? Because it valued the home more than the battlefield, marriage more than military grandeur, and children more than generals. Peace in the home mattered to our ancestors more than the greatest military victory. So as we celebrate Chanukah, spare a thought for the real victory, which was not military but spiritual. [...] In Judaism, the light of peace takes precedence over the light of war.

Source: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Click [here](#) to access the source. Scroll down to find Chanukah

EXCERPT 4

THE MILITARY victory [of Chanukah] was short-lived. Within a century Israel was again under foreign rule, this time by the Romans. It was the spiritual victory that survived. Realising that the real battle was not against an empire but a culture, Jews set about constructing the world's first system of universal education. The effect was astonishing. Although they were later to suffer devastating defeats at the hands of the Romans, they had created an identity so strong that it was able to survive 2,000 years of exile and dispersion. What history taught them was that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need schools. In the short run battles are won by weapons, but in the long run they are won by ideas and the way they are handed on from generation to generation. Oddly but appropriately, Chanukah comes from the same Hebrew root as the word "chinuch", meaning "education". Chanukah tells us that there are two different battles for freedom. One is fought by soldiers, the other by teachers, and it is the second that eventually determines the course of history. When civilisations clash, strengthen schools. The world we build tomorrow is born in the lessons we teach today. [Credo, The Times \(7 December 2007\)](#)

EXCERPT 5

Chanukah in Our Time. BACK IN 1991, I lit Chanukah candles with Mikhail Gorbachev, who had, until earlier that year, been President of the Soviet Union. For seventy years, the practice of Judaism had been effectively banned in communist Russia. It was one of the two great assaults on our people and our faith in the 20th century. The Germans sought to kill Jews; the Russians tried to kill Judaism. Under Stalin the assault became brutal. In 1967, after Israel's victory in the Six Day War, many Soviet Jews sought to leave Russia and go to Israel. Not only was permission refused, but often the Jews concerned lost their jobs and were imprisoned. Around the world, Jews campaigned for the prisoners, *Refuseniks* they were called, to be released and permitted to leave the country. Eventually Mikhail Gorbachev realised that the whole Soviet system was unworkable. Communism had brought repression, a police state, and a new hierarchy of power, not freedom and equality. In the end it collapsed, and Jews regained the freedom to practise Judaism and to go to Israel.

That day in 1991, after we had lit candles together, Mr Gorbachev asked me, through his interpreter, what we had just done. I told him that 22 centuries ago in Israel after the public practice of Judaism had been banned, Jews fought for and won their freedom, and these lights were the symbol of that victory. And I continued: “Seventy years ago, Jews suffered the same loss of freedom in Russia, and you have now helped them to regain it. So you have become part of the Chanukah story.” And as the interpreter translated those words into Russian, Mikhail Gorbachev blushed. The Chanukah story still lives, still inspires, telling not just us but the world that though tyranny exists, freedom, with God’s help, will always win the final battle.

Rabbi Sacks here applies the messages of the Chanukah story to contemporary times. What can we learn from Chanukah to help us this year? The Chanukah lights are the symbol of the survival of the Jewish people and Jewish culture. They represent hope and faith in the future, because even when the situation looked impossibly bleak, the Maccabees refused to give up hope in the future, and fought to triumph over the darkness.

Source: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Click [here](#) to access the source. Scroll down to find Chanukah

EXCERPT 6

THE SYMBOL of Chanukah is the *chanukiah* we light for eight days in memory of the Temple Menorah, purified and rededicated by the Maccabees all those centuries ago. Faith is like a flame. Properly tended, it gives light and warmth, but let loose, it can burn and destroy. We need, in the 21st century, a global Chanukah: a festival of freedom for all the world’s faiths. For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we are each free to light our own flame, together we can banish some of the darkness of the world.

Source: Why Chanukah is the Perfect Festival for Religious Freedom, The Washington Post (7 December 2015)

“A candle is a small thing. But one candle can light another. And see how its own light increases, as a candle gives its flame to the other? You are such a light.” Rabbi Moshe Davis

EXCERPT 7

THERE’S A fascinating argument in the Talmud which debates the following question: Can you take one Chanukah light to light another? Usually, of course, we take an extra light, the *shamash*, and use it to light all the candles. But suppose we don’t have one. Can we light the first candle and then use it to light the others? Two great Sages of the third century, Rav and Shmuel, disagreed. Rav said ‘No’. Shmuel said ‘Yes’. Normally we have a rule that when Rav and Shmuel disagree, the law follows Rav. There are only three exceptions, and this is one of them.

Why did Rav say you may not take one Chanukah candle to light the others? Because, says the Talmud, *ka-mach-chish mitzvah. You will diminish the first candle.* Inevitably you will spill some of the wax or the oil. And Rav says: don’t do anything that would diminish the light of the first.

But Shmuel disagrees, and the law follows Shmuel. Why? [...] When I use the flame of my faith to light a candle in someone else’s life, my Jewishness/ (my light) is not diminished. It grows, because there is now more [...] light in the world. *When it comes to spiritual goods as opposed to material goods, the more I share, the more I have.* If I share my knowledge, or faith, or love with others, I won’t have less; I may even have more. That’s the view of Shmuel, and that is how the law was eventually decided.

Source: Why Chanukah is the Perfect Festival for Religious Freedom, The Washington Post (7 December 2015)

“A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.” James Keller

EXCERPT 8

Publicizing the Miracle

Something that may be tied to the goal of publicizing the miracle: Although any type of oil is allowed for the Hanukkah lights, the rabbis considered olive oil to be the choicest. Why? Because, they said, it produces “a clearer and brighter light.” Although not explicitly stated, one might guess that a brighter light would be more effective in broadcasting the miracle. Perhaps the rabbis also thought that stronger lights would make a deeper impression on the individuals kindling the lights. In fact, the impulse for the rabbis’ entire discussion about the procedure for kindling the Hanukkah lights seems to be their concern with how individuals experience holiness through ritual. The rabbis felt that simply kindling one light every night would not sufficiently reflect the power of the Hanukkah miracle. The schools of Shammai and of Hillel had different ideas about how to better connect the ritual act to the miracle.

The school of Shammai prescribed that on the first day of Chanukah each person should light eight lights and then decrease the lights by one on each succeeding night. Their reasoning, as explained in the Talmud, is that the number of lights kindled on a particular night would thereby correspond to the numbers of days that remain in the miracle. Further, during the course of the actual miracle in the Temple, the oil available for the miracle decreased during each of the eight days.

The school of Hillel, on the other hand, suggested kindling a single light on the first night and moving up to eight on the last night. The rabbis explain that the school of Hillel was focusing on enumerating the days of the miracle that had already passed rather than those yet to come. But the clincher, the reason the school of Hillel won out (as they did in most disputes with the school of Shammai), is that they seemed to better understand the human experience of the miraculous. Their reason for increasing the number of lights each night was that “*in sacred matters we elevate, and do not lower (the degree of holiness).*” Personal meaning is created in the details of the ritual act, and the rabbis’ goal seemed to be to develop the most intense connection possible between ritual act and spiritual intention.

Source: *Publicizing the Hanukkah Miracle* by Michele Alperin

EXCERPT 9

Chanukah Kavanot/ Chanukah Intentions

“*From Every Human Arises a Light*” - Ba’al Shem Tov

Despite the fact that Chanukah falls during the darkest and shortest days of the year, our homes are aglow. Each night as we light the chanukiah, we put them in the window. Not only are we publicizing the miracle, but also we are reminded that we must metaphorically “shed light” and take it upon ourselves to make the world less dark. Chanukah is often translated as rededication; we all need to consider how we can rededicate ourselves to spreading light in our families and our communities through our words and actions. Traditionally, there are eight kavannot (intentions) that one can assign to each night of Chanukah. Below, I’ve offered some to consider. Just as the candles of the chanukiah should be all the same height, except for the shamash, no one of these is more important than the other. Kavannot to consider:

- Focus on unplugged family time: play a board game, cook a meal, work on a puzzle together.
- Return to nature: go for a walk, watch a sunset or sunrise, try a new winter sport.
- Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or charitable organization.

- Study a Jewish text: Learn about Rabbis Hillel and Shammai's debate about lighting the Chanukah candles. Why do we light from 1 to 8 and not 8 to 1?
- Set aside time to quiet your mind – for some it's prayer, for others it's yoga, or running. Find your quiet time.
- Consider donating to an organization that speaks to your heart and soul.
- Connect to Israel: subscribe to newsfeed from Israel (Israel 21C, Ynet in English, Stand with Israel), listen to an Israeli podcast (Israel Story, Streetwise Hebrew).
- Reach out to family and friends who may not live close by and let them know you're thinking of them.

Excerpt from: [Blog by Amy Gold, Epstein Hillel School, Marblehead, Mass](#)

EXCERPT 10

Lighting Up the Darkness

All around us is darkness. And what do we do? We light a fire. Not a bonfire, but a small fire ...

We are all of us, afraid of the dark. At night, anxieties suppressed or repressed come swimming to the surface of consciousness: Am I safe? Am I loved? Am I needed? Is there meaning in the world, or is it all, ultimately, just a swirl of chaos? For some of us much of the time, and for all of us some of the time, darkness suggests peril and instability, the sense that life is fleeting, tenuous, random and senseless. Judaism does not ask us to ignore this darkness and the sense of doom it might induce in us. On the contrary, it asks us to face them squarely, and then, ultimately, to defy them. But how? [...] To be a Jew is, like a star, to bring light to places of vast darkness. [...] There is something crucial to keep in mind about the nature of stars. Stars do not eliminate the darkness, but rather mitigate it; do not turn the world into a palace full of light, but rather find ways to shed light in places that would otherwise be consumed by absolute darkness. In a similar vein, we ought to be wary, to say the least, of the fantasy that human beings can somehow remove all darkness from human life. [...] We can bring light into otherwise abandoned places, to bring flashes of meaning and companionship to places otherwise overrun by heartache and devastation. [...]

What does all of this have to do with Hanukkah? Think for a moment about the central ritual act that marks this holiday. It is winter now: the days are getting shorter and shorter, and the nights are getting longer and longer. Pesach and Sukkot begin in the middle of the Jewish month, when the moon is full. But Hanukkah is different: it begins on the 25th of the month, when the moon has all but completely disappeared. We are in one of the darkest periods of one of the darkest months of the year. All around us is darkness. And what do we do? We light a fire. Not a bonfire, but a small fire -- now one, now another, and so forth for eight nights. In other words, we do not pretend to be the sun, but only stars. We do not bring an end to darkness but soften its effects. "The soul of man is the lamp of God," the Book of Proverbs tells us (20:27). What this means is that ultimately, our task is not to light candles, but to be candles. We have the potential to be the bits of light that help bring God back into a world gone dark. As the Sefas Emes puts it in discussing Hanukkah, "A human being is created to light up this world" (Hanukkah, 1874).

Source: [Rabbi Shai Held Lighting Up the Darkness:](#)