



Photo: Lightstock 2016

***Do not gloat over
me, my enemy!
Though I have
fallen, I will rise.
Though I sit in
darkness,
the LORD will
be my light.***

— Micah 7:8

Hanukkah: A Celebration of Light



During the darkest time of the year, when the days are short and the nights long, we celebrate *Hanukkah*, a festival of light. It commemorates events that occurred during dark days for the nation of Israel, but God brought about salvation which culminated with a miracle of light.

In the second century BCE, the Greeks controlled and oppressed the Jews in Israel. They sought to destroy the Jewish people by outlawing the most essential Jewish practices and encouraging complete assimilation. The Greeks believed that they were enlightened and maintained that the Jews who followed the Bible were stuck in irrelevant rituals of the past.

Their mission was to obliterate what they thought was an archaic way of life and bring Jews into what they saw as the modern, advanced lifestyle. The Greeks won over many Jews – known as Hellenists – some of whom became the worst enemies of the Jews who were faithful to following the Bible. However, there was a small faction who resisted the Greeks and ultimately rebelled.

The rebellion began when the Greeks demanded that the Jews sacrifice a pig to Greek gods. A family of priests, led by their father Mattityahu, headed to the hills of Judea where they launched guerilla warfare against the Greek army. This tiny group of pious Jews, who called themselves the Maccabees, managed to defeat legion after legion of the Greek army. Several years into the fighting, they were able to liberate the Temple in

Jerusalem and drive the enemy from their midst.

When the fighters arrived at the Temple, they were saddened to find it desecrated and in shambles. They cleaned it up, removed the idols, and re-dedicated it on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of *Kislev*. *Hanukkah* means “dedication” and recalls both this re-dedication of the Temple and the devoted dedication of the Jewish fighters.

When it came time to light the *menorah*, the Temple lampstand, the Jews could only find one jar of pure olive oil that was still sealed with the name of the high priest. The Jews decided to light the *menorah* anyway, and miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days until more oil arrived. Today, we commemorate this miracle by lighting our own *menorahs* for eight nights.

While the main miracle of *Hanukkah*, the miracle of the oil that lasted beyond one day, is directly connected to light, the celebration of light goes beyond remembering the events of the past. Light and darkness are symbolic of the entire *Hanukkah* story and serve as the basis for the eternal lessons that can be learned from this rich holiday.

In this month’s *Limmud* study, we will discover the deeper meanings of darkness and light. As we literally brighten the darkest time of the year, we will uncover God’s power and our abilities through Him to bring illumination anywhere or anytime darkness threatens to obscure the light.



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Sharing Our Light

he says:

*“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
— Isaiah 49:6 ESV*

When lighting the *menorah*, the custom prescribed by the Jewish sages is to “publicize the miracle of *Hanukkah*.” We do this by lighting our *menorahs* in a place where it is most visible from the outside. That might be in front of our biggest window or even just outside our homes in specially made glass display cases. Moreover, many communities arrange public lighting ceremonies, often with *menorahs* built on a large scale. We do our utmost to make sure that the light of *Hanukkah* is seen from near and far.

However, we must ask why we follow this custom. We don’t find the idea of being public with our faith anywhere else in Judaism. There is no public display of eating *matzah* on Passover or blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*. Why are we so intent on making our *Hanukkah* ritual so public?

One answer is that the very nature of the *Hanukkah* story involved those who were proud of their Jewish faith and those who wished to hide it so they would be accepted into Greek society. It was those who stood up for their values by holding onto their faith that brought about the *Hanukkah*

victory. When we light our *menorahs* in public, we boldly declare that we are proud to be Jewish. We are not afraid, and we will not hide. We take pride in our heritage and value our identity.

On another level, the idea of lighting our *menorahs* in public is about shining light into the heart of darkness from our homes. This affirms that the light begins in the home. Home is the first place that we must illuminate with kindness, goodness, and the Word of God. However, it is not enough to keep the light to ourselves.

We are meant to be a “*light for the nations*.” When we place our *menorah* lights for all to see, we affirm our obligation to share our light with the world. We remember that even one candle can dispel much darkness while all the darkness in the world cannot extinguish one flame.

A third reason for publicizing the miracle is because we are always meant to make known God’s great deeds. It is a statement of praise and gives glory to God when we share the miracles He has done. We shed light on gloomy situations and provide a ray of hope in the darkness.

think about it...

1. Darkness is simply the absence of light. It’s impossible to add darkness; it is only possible to decrease the light. What does this teach us about making our lives better? What about making the world a better place for all?
2. How might you add more “light” into your life? How might you help dispel darkness in your community?
3. The *Hanukkah* story is all about beating the odds. Think of a time in your life where you succeeded despite the odds against you. In what ways did God help you overcome your circumstances?
4. What does it mean that “the LORD will be my light” (Micah 7:8)? How is God a light to you in your life especially in times of darkness?
5. The Maccabees have come to symbolize those who stand up for what’s right even when it is difficult and unpopular. In what ways have you been called to be a “Maccabee” in your life? What person/people do you know who exemplifies the ideals of the Maccabees?
6. The battle between the Greeks and the Jews can be simplified as the battle between valuing the superficial exterior elements of life versus the unseen inner life. How does that battle continue to play out even today, both in our personal lives and in our society as a whole?



Photo: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872)

Conquering the Darkness

So he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

— Zechariah 4:6

The battle between the Jews and the Greeks that we recall on *Hanukkah* was more than a physical battle; it was a battle of ideals and values. The Greeks proclaimed that all that matters is what we can see, touch, and understand. The Jews believed that what matters most cannot be seen, touched, or understood. The Greeks believed that beauty was holy. The Jews maintained that holiness is beautiful. The Greeks worshiped the physical body; the Jews cherished the soul.

The ideals of the Greeks encouraged immorality, idolatry, and selfishness. The Jews stood for goodness, godliness, and kindness. This was a battle between good and evil, darkness and light. While the Greeks tried to extinguish the light of the *Torah*, a great miracle happened and the small group of remaining loyal Jews were able to conquer the darkness.

However, it's critical to understand that this battle was not won in a natural way. That wouldn't have been enough to completely eradicate the ideals of the Greeks. Instead, it was won in a supernatural way. As we recall in our *Hanukkah* prayers, God placed the many in the hands of the few, the mighty in the hands of the weak. God fought

the battles for the Jews who fought with their faith.

The attitude of these fighters can be found in their chosen name. They became known as the Maccabees, ultimately led by Judah the Maccabee. Maccabee can mean “hammer,” and indeed the Maccabees hammered their enemies, fighting off the greatest, mightiest army of the time. Yet Maccabee is also a Hebrew acronym for the phrase: “*Who among the gods is like you, LORD?*” (Exodus 15:11). This was the battle call of those brave fighters, and it was also the source of their strength.

On *Hanukkah*, we celebrate the miracle of the triumph of the Maccabees over the Greeks, which is also the victory of light over darkness. Appropriately, we light candles in the darkness to commemorate the event. Even just one candle can dispel so much darkness.

As we gaze at the candles each night during *Hanukkah*, we remember that the way to fight darkness is by adding more light. It's not by might, but by God's spirit and light that redemption will come into the world. When we affirm our faith in God, we continue the legacy of the Maccabees and merit the same Divine assistance afforded to them.

apply it...

1. Light one candle in a darkened room. Spend some time gazing at the flame, contemplating its message from the *Hanukkah* story, and connecting with God.
2. Add light to the world. Brighten someone's day with a gift, a smile, a listening ear, an encouraging word, or a random act of kindness.
3. What challenge are you facing right now that seems insurmountable? Remember how God helped the Maccabees. Pray to Him, trust in Him, and expect miracles.
4. Think of a time when God has helped you, or someone you know, overcome insurmountable odds. Share that story with others. By doing so we encourage others and reignite hope.
5. Be a Maccabee this week! Think of a situation — whether at work, home, school, or your neighborhood — where you can speak out and take action for what is right even when most people might disagree.
6. Examine your life to see if there is any part of your daily habits in which you are tempted — like the Hellenists — to set aside your faith and conform to the prevailing attitudes of the day.

Customs and Rituals Observed Today



The main practice during the celebration of *Hanukkah* is the lighting of the *menorah*. In some families, one person represents the entire household and lights one *menorah* on everyone's behalf. In other families, each family member lights his or her own *menorah*. Either way, it is best to light the *menorah* in the presence of other people as this helps us fulfill our duty to make public the miracle of *Hanukkah*.

Consequently, the candle lighting must take place after nightfall when it is dark outside, yet we must kindle the lights early enough in the evening when people who are still out may see the light. We try to place the *menorah* in a spot where it can be seen from the house – either in front of a window or outside the home. While we are used to seeing more modern-day, pretty-colored candles alight in a *menorah*, it is more ideal to use oil for lighting the candles as it more accurately represents the miracle of the *Hanukkah* oil.

We begin the first night by lighting one candle, adding a candle each subsequent night for the eight days of *Hanukkah*. It's important that the candles are evenly spaced apart and about the same height so one can easily tell how many candles are lit instead of confusing the *menorah* for one big torch.

Each night, in addition to the *Hanukkah* candles, there is an extra candle called the *shamash*, which means “helper.” Since the *Hanukkah* candles are considered holy, they aren't allowed to be used for any other purpose, like a reading light or lighting another candle. The *shamash* is used to light the candles instead. The *Hanukkah* candles are designated exclusively for spiritual introspection and inspiration.

Before the candle lighting, we offer several blessings thanking God for the miracles He has done. After the lighting the candles, we sing songs with similar themes.

Other *Hanukkah* customs include eating foods fried in oil, such as potato *latkes* (potato pancakes) and special jelly-filled donuts called *sugfaniyah*. This recalls the oil from the *Hanukkah* story. It is also traditional to play with a spinning top called a *dreidel*. This custom is derived from the time of the Greek oppression when *Torah* study was strictly forbidden. Jewish children would keep spinning tops at their side while they studied the *Torah* so if any Greeks happened to come by, the children would pretend that they were simply playing games and not studying God's Word.

Finally, there is a custom to give out *Hanukkah gelt*, or money, to children. This is to teach them that there is reward for studying the Bible – even under difficult situations. Today, we often give chocolate coins or gifts instead, but the underlying lesson that *Torah* study is a most worthwhile pursuit remains the same.

