



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Chanukah 5765  
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### **Shalom!**

#### Introduction

I recently had the pleasure of seeing a performance of “Les Miserables.” The musical, based on the book by Victor Hugo, is the story of Jean Valjean, a man who spent nearly twenty years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread and then, upon his release, struggles through a number of events and experiences in order to reclaim his identity as a man and not as a prisoner or fugitive. One of his more memorable numbers is, “Who am I?”

Beneath the much-loved Chanukah traditions of dreidles and latkes, wondrous eight-day miracles and sufganiot (jelly filled doughnuts) a similar question presents itself: Who are we?



The historical story of Chanukah is fairly straightforward. Alexander, the Greek leader, strode across the stage of history in the early 4th century B.C.E., bringing much of the known world under his control. By most accounts, he was an impressive man who valued the ideas and teachings of the peoples he conquered. He viewed Greek culture as a way to unite the array of peoples and nations under his sway, not as a way to erase their value. While his empire’s foundation would be Greek culture, he wanted each people to contribute its language and culture to the whole. Alexander established the great library at Alexandria where the works of all the nations, translated into Greek, were available to scholars.

We Jews benefited from this interchange of ideas and culture in many ways, flourishing in the context of early Hellenistic culture. After Alexander’s death, his empire was

divided among his many generals. We were ruled first by Egypt and then by Syria. By 176 B.C.E. we were under the rule of Antiochus IV, who called himself Epiphanes, “God made manifest.” Antiochus imposed ever more demanding versions of Hellenistic culture on us, often supported in this cruel effort by the priests in Jerusalem.

In a supreme act of hubris, Antiochus desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by erecting a statue of Zeus in the Temple Courts and proclaiming that Jews were to worship the Greek god. Pigs were sacrificed on the altar. The study of Torah was forbidden. Sabbath observance was made a crime. In every town and village, heathen altars were erected and we were commanded to worship at them or face death. As the result of these horrible rulings, Judaism itself was in grave danger of becoming extinct.

Only the determined heroism of Mattathias and his five sons, one of whom was Judah Maccabee (the name “Maccabee” means either “Hammerer” or is an acronym taken from the first letters of the mi kamocho prayer.) Rallying the Jews, Judah led an insurrection that ultimately resulted in the reconsecration of the Temple on the 25th of Kislev.

Chanukah is our celebration of this reconsecration or “rededication” of the Temple.

Judah and his followers reestablished Jewish practice and ritual in the Temple and the country. It is useful to remember that the process from Alexander’s welcoming of diversity in his empire to Antiochus’ cruel edicts took several generations and that, for much of that time Jews and Jewish leaders were fully supportive of and compliant in our Hellenisation. In short, during those years we assimilated into the larger culture.

Any minority community in a larger culture struggles with the conflicting needs to remain distinct and to assimilate. The choice is never one or the other. Throughout our history, we Jews have reaped the benefits of and suffered the dangers of assimilation. The question is: How do we remain distinctive while participating appropriately in a larger culture? What do we borrow from the culture and transform into our own and what do we bring to the culture to enlarge it? What do we protect and cherish as distinctly ours?

Which brings us back to the fundamental question of Chanukah, Who are we? Judaism can never, and should never, be isolated from other cultures. Indeed, as Jews we often find ourselves living within larger cultures from which we have often derived great benefit. Our challenge has always been to balance that benefit while ensuring that we do not lose the essential strength of what it means to be Jewish.



### **Questions for your Family’s Discussions**

Whether over a Shabbat meal this Friday, or at a festive Chanukah celebration, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. What do you enjoy most about our American culture (favorite movies, books, movies, etc)?
2. How might your experience of these things strengthen your Jewish experience (for example, my seeing “Les Miserables” gave me added insight into the meaning of Chanukah)?
3. Existing in a larger culture is never a “one-way street.” How do we as Jews contribute to the larger culture around us? How has our sense of laws and ethics contributed to Western culture?
4. Judah Maccabee “saved” Judaism by his zealotry. How did his zealotry differ from some of the religious fundamentalists in the world today?

### A Text to Wrestle With

Before lighting the candles the following blessings are said...

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר  
 קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוֵּנוּ  
 לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hei-nu meh-lech ha-o-lam a-sher ki-d'sha-nu b' mitz-vo-tav v'tzi-va-nu l'had-lik ner shel Chanukah.*

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You make us holy with Your Mitzvot, and command us to kindle the Chanukah lights.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים  
 לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ/לְאֲמוֹתֵינוּ  
 בְּיָמֵי הַהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

*Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hei-nu meh-lech ha-o-lam, sheh-a-sa-ni-sim la-a-vo-tei-nu/l'i-mo-tei-nu ba-ya-mim ha-heim ba-z'man ha-zeh.*

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You showed wonders to your fathers/mothers in days of old, at this season.

*The following blessing is said on the first night:*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ  
 וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ  
 לְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

*Ba-ruch a-ta A-do-nai, E-lo-hei-nu me-lech ha-o-lam, she-hecheyanu, v'ki-y'manu, v'higi-anu la-z'man hazeh.*

We praise you, Eternal One, Sovereign God of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

- The holiday of Chanukah is not a Biblical mitzvah, but one that came from the rabbis in ancient times. Why then, do we thank God (in the first blessing) for giving us the mitzvah of kindling Chanukah lights?

### **Toward an Action Agenda**

1. "Dedicate" each night to a particular Jewish practice or idea that is meaningful to you and your family. (i.e., the first night can be the night of family, or books. The second night, the night of community, etc. Use the opportunity to discuss why these practices and ideas are important to you and your family.)
2. Research several charities in your community. Which ones are dedicated solely to the Jewish community and which are dedicated to the community at large? Have a family discussion about which charities you would want to support and why? Make a contribution (in money, clothing, food or time) to these charities based on your discussion.

### **Chag Sameach & Shabbat Shalom!**

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: [www.bjeny.org](http://www.bjeny.org)

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