OLAMI MENTORSHIP



CHANUKAH · UNPACKED

HOW, WHAT, WHEN & WHY?

A SESSION FOR MENTORS AND MENTEES

PART 1

THE STORY YOU KNOW

START HERE

What did Chanukah look like in your home growing up?

One Jewish writer remembers a "Chanukah bush" by the fireplace every December, with candy canes, tinsel, and a star on top. All he knew about Chanukah was that it had something to do with oil and a battle against the Greeks (or was it the Syrians?). Many of us grew up knowing about that much.

Here is the actual story in five simple steps:

1 THE BAN

About 2,200 years ago, the Greeks ruled the Land of Israel. They banned three Jewish practices on penalty of death: Shabbat, commemorating the new Jewish month, and circumcision.

2 THE FIGHTERS

A family of kohanim/priests, Mattityahu and his sons, led a revolt. His son Judah became known as "the Maccabee."

3 THE VICTORY

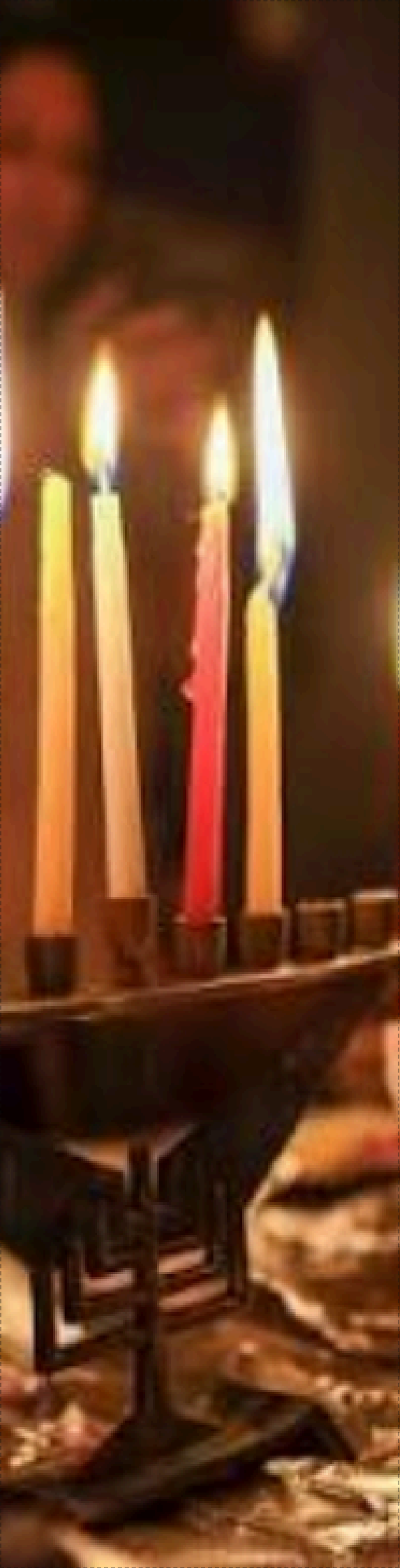
Against huge odds, the small Jewish army defeated the Greek empire and took back the Temple in Jerusalem.

4 THE MIRACLE

They wanted to light the Temple's menorah but found only one jar of pure oil, enough for one day. It burned for eight days.

5 THE HOLIDAY

Ever since, Jews light a menorah for eight nights, eat foods fried in oil, and play dreidel.



PART 2

FOUR QUESTIONS

What do you think?

1 THE BAN

The Greeks usually let conquered nations keep their own religion, as long as they added a statue of Zeus. Why would an empire care whether Jews rested on Saturday, kept a lunar Jewish calendar, or circumcised their sons?

2 THE FIGHTERS

In Israel today, "Maccabi" is a soccer team, a beer, and the Jewish Olympics. Were the Maccabees soldiers and athletes? And if Chanukah celebrates a great victory, why is there no victory parade?

3 THE MIRACLE

The Talmud asks, "What is Chanukah?" and answers: the oil. A tiny army defeating an empire isn't even called a miracle. Why not?

4 THE NUMBER

Why eight? The oil lasted eight days, Chanukah lasts eight days, and circumcision, one of the banned practices, happens on the eighth day of a baby's life. Coincidence?

PART 3

THE ANSWERS

1 – THE BAN: TWO WAYS OF SEEING THE WORLD

The Greeks weren't just conquering land. They were spreading a worldview, and Judaism stood in its way.

	THE GREEK VIEW	THE JEWISH VIEW
WHAT MATTERS MOST	The human being: the perfect body and the brilliant mind	God, and a life connected to something higher
WHAT IS REAL	Nature: what you can see and measure	Nature, and something beyond it

The three banned practices are all signs of a relationship with something beyond nature. Shabbat is like a wedding ring between God and the Jewish people. The Jewish calendar follows the moon, which disappears and always comes back. Circumcision puts that relationship into the body itself. To erase the idea of "something beyond," the Greeks went after exactly these three.

DISCUSS: WHERE DO YOU SEE THE GREEK VIEW IN YOUR WORLD TODAY?

2 – THE FIGHTERS: PRIESTS, NOT WARRIORS

So who would fight for "something beyond nature"? Not athletes. The Maccabees were kohanim/priests who served in the Temple. They weren't fighting for power or land; they were defending a way of life.

That's why there's no parade. Judaism never glorified war: even King David wasn't allowed to build the Temple, because he had fought so many battles.



3 – THE MIRACLE: TWO KINDS OF MIRACLES

The Talmud tells of a rabbi's daughter who lit her Shabbat candles with vinegar by mistake. Her father said: "The One who told oil to burn can tell vinegar to burn." The vinegar burned all Shabbat.

His point: oil burning is also a miracle. We see it every day, so we call it "chemistry." Some miracles break the pattern of nature; others are woven into it so well that we stop noticing.

To the Sages, the victory was the second kind. They knew that if Jews kept living Jewishly and didn't give up, they would outlast any empire. That's built into the world. Oil burning for eight days broke the pattern, so that's what they called "the miracle."

DISCUSS

What's something in your life you've stopped noticing because it happens every day?

4 – THE NUMBER: SEVEN AND EIGHT

7 8

In Jewish thought, seven is the number of nature: seven days of creation, seven days in a week, seven notes in a scale. Eight is one step beyond nature.

Now the eights make sense. Circumcision is on the eighth day because it says the body is connected to a soul, which is exactly why the Greeks banned it. And the oil burned for eight days, giving the answer to the Greeks in their own language: there is more than nature.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

It's one story from beginning to end:

7 The Greeks said there is only seven: nature, the body, what you can see. So they banned the practices of "eight."

8 The Maccabees, priests, fought for eight: a life connected to something beyond.

8 The miracle of the oil, eight days, was God's answer: they were right.

8 Chanukah, eight nights, is how we keep that answer alive.

PART 4

WHAT IT MEANS FOR ME

Think back to Rosh Hashanah back in September. Maybe you made a resolution: call your parents more, give more, learn more, be more honest at work. It's now December. That resolution feels like something you said when you weren't being realistic.

That's the voice of "seven": be realistic, nature always wins, give it up.

The Maccabees heard that voice for years. They kept going, outnumbered and losing, until the light broke through. That's why we add one candle each night instead of starting with eight: growth happens one step at a time.

DISCUSS

What's one commitment from this year that's starting to fade?

What small step could light it back up?

So who really won? The Greek empire is in museums. The tiny nation that believed in "eight" is lighting candles from Manhattan to Tel Aviv.

TAKEAWAY: CHANUKAH ISN'T ABOUT A WAR OR ABOUT PRESENTS. IT'S ABOUT REFUSING TO LET "REALISTIC" HAVE THE LAST WORD.



CHANUKAH HOW-TO

CHANUKAH 2026
DEC 4 – DEC 12

FIRST CANDLE	EIGHTH CANDLE	CHANUKAH ENDS
FRI. DEC 4	**FRI. DEC 11**	**SAT. DEC 12**
Evening	Evening	At nightfall

WHAT YOU NEED

- A menorah with eight branches in a row, plus a separate spot for the shamash, the “helper” candle used to light the others.
- Candles or olive oil with wicks. Olive oil is ideal, since the miracle happened with oil. Each night’s lights need to burn at least 30 minutes after dark.
- An electric menorah is nice for decoration, but lighting real flames is what counts.

WHERE TO LIGHT

- In a window facing the street, so people passing by can see the lights. The whole point is to share the miracle with the world.
- Or by your front door, on the left side as you walk in, opposite the mezuzah.
- If you live high up in an apartment building, a window is fine.

WHEN TO LIGHT

- **Most nights:** right after dark. If you miss that, you can still light later in the evening while people in your home are awake.
- **Friday nights (December 4 and 11):** light the Chanukah candles before Shabbat begins, before the Shabbat candles. Use bigger candles or more oil so they last until at least 30 minutes after dark.
- **Saturday night (December 5):** wait until Shabbat is over, then light.

HOW TO LIGHT

1. **Set up.** On the first night, put one candle on the far right of the menorah. Each night, add one more candle to the left of the night before.
2. Light the shamash first.
3. Say the blessings below, holding the shamash.
4. Light the newest candle first, the one farthest to the left, then move to the right.
5. Return the shamash to its place.
6. **Sing and stay a while.** Many sing Haneirot Halalu ("These lights") and Maoz Tzur ("Rock of Ages"). The Chanukah lights are just for looking at, not for reading or working by, so sit with them for a few minutes.

THE BLESSINGS

EVERY NIGHT

1. **Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Chanukah.**

   Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who made us holy with His commandments and commanded us to light the Chanukah lights.

2. **Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, she'asah nisim la'avoteinu, bayamim haheim bazman hazeh.**

   Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, at this time of year.

FIRST NIGHT ONLY, ADD

3. **Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.**

   Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this moment.



CUSTOMS

FOODS FRIED IN OIL

To remember the miracle of the oil: latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts).

DREIDEL

The four letters on the top stand for "A great miracle happened there." Everyone puts a coin or chocolate in the pot, then takes turns spinning. Nun: nothing happens. Gimmel: take the whole pot. Hei: take half. Shin: put one in. (In Israel, the last letter is Pei: "A great miracle happened here.")

GELT

Coins, real or chocolate, given especially to children.

GIVING

Chanukah is a traditional time to give charity and to share the light with others.

SPECIAL PRAYERS

A paragraph of thanks, Al Hanisim ("For the miracles"), is added to the daily prayers and to the blessing after meals, and Hallel, a set of praise psalms, is said each morning.

BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Host a lighting, invite some friends for a Chanukah party, celebrate and give thanks for the miraculous eternity of the Jewish people.