

HANUKKAH



LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS



HANUKKAH: LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

During Hanukkah we seek to enhance the light in a season when the days are short. It is a time to seek miracles in a world that desperately longs for the spirit's healing light.

In this resource booklet you will find personal reflections from individuals who found some measure of healing through the lights of Hanukkah and through the traditions of this festival in the midst of their personal darkness.

On Hanukkah we gather around the *chanukiyah*, gaze upon these lights that proclaim layer upon layer of miracles, and enjoy traditional foods cooked in oil, such as latkes and *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts). On these eight nights we hope to celebrate with those who bring meaning to our lives—our families, friends, worship and volunteer communities, colleagues at work. Yet, many of us may be alone, finding it challenging to connect with others as we struggle in the shadow of darkness.

At this Hanukkah season we invite you to be mindful of the darkness that affects many in our community. Some of those who struggle are present at our family and community gatherings, while others face their challenges in isolation. These challenges are both individual and communal: illness, divorce, loss and bereavement, addiction, domestic violence, mental illness, care-giving and living with the threat of terrorism. Each challenge has unique aspects, but they also share universal themes. What ties them together is the hope of experiencing light and strength in the midst of darkness.

We offer this booklet as one way of increasing light. We hope you find that these words speak to you and offer a glimpse of light. We hope you find words that inspire you to be a light in someone else's life. Offer that light to someone you already know and care about or reach out to someone new, since we often do not know **who** is wrestling with **what** kind of challenges.

Warmest wishes from the
Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs
Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services

DIVORCE: IN THE LIGHT OF CHANUKAH

My marriage was over and the dark and cold of winter matched my mood. As Chanukah approached, I felt shaken and sad. For my children's sake, we accepted an invitation to a Chanukah celebration. As the candles were lit and prayers were said, we spoke of the strength and determination of our people in the face of great threat. Of course, we also spoke of the miracle of the enduring light. This joyous holiday took on new meaning for me that night...it helped me find the will to go forward at a time of personal despair and to borrow from the strength revealed in a story I had heard so many times before.

When Adam saw the days getting gradually shorter, he said: "Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returned to its state of chaos and confusion! This, then, is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!" So he began keeping an eight-day fast. But as he observed the winter equinox and noted the days getting increasingly longer he said: "This is the world's course," and he set forth to keep an eight-day festivity. Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a



CAREGIVING: THE STRENGTH TO PERSEVERE

"It's five years since the diagnosis. At first, the losses were subtle. Now he doesn't know where he is, or who I am. Fifty years we were married, knowing everything about each other. Today, all he knows is that I am someone who is kind to him. I don't know how much more I can take. I am exhausted and bored. My life is so narrow. The children try, but what can they do?"

Last night was the first night of Chanukah. I remember how it used to be. He would polish the chanukiyot until they gleamed -- the dramatic brass one with the lion, and the delicate silver one. The whole family would chant blessings, light candles and sing Chanukah songs. Last night it was just the two of us. I set up the chanukiyot near the window. He was watching me, with rapt attention. As I lit the match, his face lit up. "Shechyanu," he said, "Praised are You for keeping us alive, sustaining us and bringing us to this joyful season." He took my hand and we sang, until the phone rang, our granddaughter wishing us "Happy Chanukah." Yes, it is.

On the eight nights of Chanukah we light candles commemorating survival and victory in the face of oppression and the threat of spiritual destruction. We celebrate extraordinary miracles. But the greatest miracle was that the menorah was lit at all. The Macabees found only enough pure oil for one day. It would take seven days to get more. Yet they chose not to wait. They had the courage to take the first step; to bring light into a world of darkness and uncertainty. The first candle represents hope and the willingness to commit to life without knowing what will happen next. That is truly a miracle worth celebrating.



THE WISDOM OF ORDER: CANDLE LIGHTING AND THE TWELVE-STEPS TO RECOVERY

When I was a little girl, I loved placing the candles in the menorah. My parents didn't allow me to light the candles because I never wanted to light them in the right order. I refused to listen to the directions of others. I also loved to play with my dreidl. I would spin with the dreidl until I was so dizzy that I would fall down! This happened every time I spun the dreidl.

In looking back at my life as an addict and alcoholic, I can see that for many years my life had spun out of control because I still had refused to follow direction or listen to others. It was not until I reached out for help by seeking drug and alcohol treatment that I learned to stop spinning. Over the last thirteen years, I followed the prescribed order of my 12-step recovery program and I learned that, like the Hanukkah candles, these steps of sobriety are best done in a specific order. My new life as a recovering person was more about learning to rely on the customs and traditions that have worked so well for so many people before me. Since then, my life has stopped spinning out of control.

The miracle of Hanukkah came to me when I was in treatment and unable to physically light the candles. Yet, in my mind, I lit candles every night and I finally did so in a good orderly direction. Just a kernel of faith and prayer enabled me to visualize lighting those candles. The miracle for me was that I never could have imagined that such a small seed of recovery could create such powerful light.

The prayer of the sick person for his/her own recovery avails more than the prayer of another. -B'reishit Rabbah 53:14



ILLNESS AND HOPE: CONVERSATION WITH THE FLAMES

"During all eight days of Chanukah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them." - Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b

In front of the darkened menorah, I sit alone with this illness and pain, pondering questions I fear may have no answers. Yearning to ask, I strike the match, "Blessed are You G'd...who has commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light." The light is silent.

I read on, "You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak..." What defenses do I have that are not already compromised? Awaken within me the boldness of my Hasmonean forbearers. Awaken for me a Chanukah deliverance. O mighty Rock! "Greeks gathered against me in the Hasmonean days, breaching the walls of my towers". I understand the feeling of defilement, of illness ravaging the body. Feeling damaged, and bereft, I question my ability to fight back. The candle glows.

But one cruse of oil remained from the destruction, unsullied. "Elokai neshama she'nattati bi, tehorah he. The soul you gave me is pure." It is the candle of G'd. Let the light illuminate the wholeness within me, alive and on fire. The candlelight pulls me upwards. It is brilliant. Connection to You, my Rock, my strength, is life itself. This illness, my enemy, violates my walls-- shakes my faith-- but I carry on. The miracle is that I still look for sanctity.

Arguing, struggling, I realize we are in relationship. I am praying. Chanukah means rededication. I can rededicate myself to You. This oil will last--salvation is here-- because I am here, searching. My quest has awoken something within me. My questions rise like the flame to You, connecting Us. And from this place my healing emerges. "Kaveh el Hashem, I hope to You, G'd."

Right now, in **this** moment I am here, present for the miracle, allowing this sacred time to enter the sacred space of my inner Temple.



RECAPTURING THE GLOW: CHANUKAH AND DEPRESSION

"This first candle is not the miracle. The miracle is this candle being joined each night by another, so that throughout eight nights, we are able to experience a very sacred, special space and time."

After a routine exam, I started to leave my doctor's office. "Hold on a minute," he said. "Your tests were OK, but I'm concerned about you. You seem...quite depressed."

My stomach lurched. I struggled to breathe. My first impulse: get annoyed...or "politely" brush him off. But, somehow, I was able to hear his caring tone. I heard myself answer, "Yes. Yes, I am feeling depressed."

He suggested I see a psychiatrist he knew. I hesitated. "Well, think about it and..." he began. "No. You're right!" I quickly said. "I'd like to try."

"When each new light is added, the initial glow is deepened and strengthened..."

The psychiatrist seemed friendly, confident about helping me lift the gloom surrounding me. Not interested in my wordy explanation of my "difficult life," he challenged my belief that I either "deserved" or "was entitled" to my depression. Yet, he seemed neither condescending nor disapproving, a big surprise!

I went ahead with a trial of anti-depressant medication and some painful, pointed discussion of how I managed my life.

"The Chanukiyah is to be put in a spot visible to the outside world, to share its glow with others and hearten those still in darkness."

I began to feel both my mood and my ability to handle life's ups and downs improve. I had kept all this hidden...but gradually began to realize that this hiding out wasn't helping me...or anyone around me.

The first person I told was a friend and colleague who had plenty of her own tsuris. I felt nervous and uptight, but her response was warm and welcoming. Eventually, I started attending a group, whose acceptance and understanding added greatly to my own "illumination." And I hope my small miracle of light will glow for others, as well.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: HEALING THROUGH COMMUNITY

Through a long and hard journey, I have come to accept that I can't control David's behavior--it's not about me "doing it right" so there will be peace in our home. I cannot make him do anything and I am not responsible for his behavior! It sounds so obvious, but I really believed I was to blame. I started learning to see things differently in a support group with others like me. It took a very long time for me to get there. But I got there. And, by hearing others tell their stories and through their commitment to me I learned to disclose to others despite my great fear and shame.

I have learned to see what is happening in our relationship. I have learned to trust my instincts--recognize the glances, hear that tone of voice and that feeling in my soul that usually precedes an attack. I've developed a safety plan; I can leave a set of keys to the car and the house with my brother in case I have to leave quickly.

This small group was the answer to my prayers. They did not see me as damaged but as courageous and wise. They loved my creativity and humor. How healing. How wonderful. What a triumph!

*In the darkness of the night
The Maccabees lit a flame
Thank You for giving them the courage to resist...
Each night of life let us add candles:
The candle of hope.
The candle of faith.
The candle of brave deeds.
The candle of freedom...*

Excerpt from I. Michael Hecht, In Darkness, Candles, found in Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals, published by the Rabbinical Assembly



GRIEF AND LOSS: MOURNING THROUGH TEARS, SILENCE, SONG

My grief moves through me like a wild river, rising and falling with total disregard for my will--at times so strong it breaks through the levees of my personhood, flooding the whole landscape of my world. Then just as suddenly, it starts to recede, leaving in its wake sometimes a sense of peace, emptiness or a deep connection to my brother who has recently died.

There are three ways to mourn: to weep, to be silent, and to sing.

The first way is to weep: *even if our tears are for ourselves, for our ache of loneliness, our anger, for our pain of loss and love-- for they are still sacred. But we may weep only if we do not weep too long, only if the spark of our own spirit is not quenched by a grief too drawn out.*

The second way is to be silent: *before lighting the Hanukkah candles, enter into silence to recall a shared moment, to remember a word or glance, or simply to miss someone very much and wish that he or she could be here.*

The third way is to sing: *with those gathered together, sing a hymn to life, a life that still abounds in sights and sounds and vivid colors. We sing the songs of our beloved and we trust in our heart that there is a God who hears the bittersweet melody of our song. **

Rock of Ages

*Rock of Ages, let our song, praise Your saving power.
You amid the raging throng were our sheltering tower...*

** Adapted from a piece attributed to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in a chapter entitled "Grief and Bereavement" by Simcha Paull Raphael in, Jewish Pastoral Care, edited by Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman. www.jewishlights.com*

HANUKKAH IN A TIME OF TERROR

I am acutely aware that we live in a time of terror. Trying to be resilient and resistant, I may suppress this reality but it is, in fact, a central part of my life now, stirring anxiety, grief, and sometimes dread.

How can Hanukkah help us cope with this sense of lurking devastation? What insights can it offer to Jews living as a tiny minority in a violent world?

To the Jewish mystical mind, the initial, proactive awakening of the Hasmoneans is what triggered Divine involvement, and together, this human-Divine partnership is what began to redeem the Jewish minority from the oppressive Graeco-Syrian empire.

Now, Kabbalah teaches us that primeval Adam/Eve, created on the morning of the sixth day, enjoyed a special light that illuminated their world through Shabbat – 36 hours total. This light was then stored as a treasure to be summoned by us, their descendants in dark times, an enduring resource for hope and redemption.

And, indeed, during Hanukkah's eight days, our shamash candle lights 36 other candles, in total. I draw strength, in our modest, yet also public, lighting, as we affirm in the shortest days of the calendar that Spirit is never extinguished, that through community and tradition we can illuminate a better world. We celebrate eight days and not seven, suggesting that the one precious cruse of oil, the earthly awakening, is equal to the seven days of creation, since without human initiative, the Divine response would not have been ignited.

I remind myself that Hanukkah comes at the moon's waning, underscoring that we are not drawing on the natural lights of sun, moon, and stars, but on a different dimension, a spiritual light born of human-Divine partnership, pointing to the ultimate redemption in history. God is relying on us to bring into being a planet of moral and spiritual light; if everyone lights their own light, godliness and goodness will triumph over evil and violence.

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts..." Zechariah 4:6, from the Prophetic Reading for Shabbat Hanukkah "The one who comes to purify, is helped (from Above)..." Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38b

Resource List

UJA-Federation of New York's Connect to Care

(212) 632-4602

Financial, legal, employment and support counseling for those effected by the recent economic downturn.

Doula to Accompany and Comfort

(212) 632-4768

Volunteer training program to visit patients near the end of life

Genesis Project

(212) 632-4732

Support groups/programs for divorced and single parent families

JACS

(212) 632-4600

Groups, retreats and programs by and for Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others

Bereavement Support Program

(212) 632-4689

Support groups and special programs for bereaved Jews

National Center for Jewish Healing

(212) 632-4500

Jewish spiritual resources, publications, program consultation, training on issues related to illness and loss

New York Jewish Healing Center

(212) 632-4500

Counseling and support groups related to illness and loss.

Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council

(212) 632-4730

Resource materials, consultation and training for visiting the sick

Shira Ruskay Center

(212) 632-4608

Support for people coping with life threatening illness or loss

Other Helpful Resources

JBFCs Family Violence Hotline (718) 237-1337

Crisis counseling and referral to community resources

JBFCs HelpLine (212) 532-2400

24-hour phone counseling, information and referral

JBFCs NYC Self-Help Center (212) 632-4531

Referral to mutual support groups in NYC and group consultation

UJA-Federation Resource Line (212) 753-2288

Information and referral to Jewish community services



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Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs

Helping individuals, families and institutions find resources to meet difficult life challenges such as illness, loss, divorce and addiction, through programs that draw on spiritual, psychological and concrete support.

Visit us at www.jcprograms.org

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