



Hanukkah Program Guide

SESSION 1: WHY DO WE CELEBRATE HANUKKAH?



Hanukkah is one of the most joyous holidays in the Jewish calendar. At the darkest time of the year, we fill our lives with the light of the *Hanukkah*, eat delicious *sufganiyot* (doughnuts), and share gifts with our families. But what is this festival all about? What are we celebrating? What are the historical sources for Hanukkah?

Source 1: The Book of Maccabees I, Chapter 4

The Book of Maccabees I is a historical work written by an anonymous author in the first century BCE. It was initially written in Hebrew and describes the events of the Jewish revolt in the Land of Israel against the Seleucid Greeks that broke out in 167 BCE. The revolt's eventual success established the Hasmonean Kingdom, an independent Jewish Kingdom in the Land of Israel. These events are celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah.

Then said Judas and his brethren, Behold, our enemies are discomfited: let us go up to cleanse and dedicate the sanctuary. Upon this all the host assembled themselves together, and went up into Mount Zion. And when they saw the sanctuary desolate, and the altar profaned, and the gates burned up, and shrubs growing in the courts as in a forest, or in one of the mountains, they rent their clothes, and made great lamentation, and cast ashes upon their heads, And fell down flat to the ground upon their faces, and blew an alarm with the trumpets, and cried toward heaven.

Then Judas appointed certain men to fight against those that were in the fortress until he had cleansed the sanctuary. So he chose priests of blameless conversation, such as had pleasure in the law: Who cleansed the sanctuary, and bare out the defiled stones into an unclean place. And when as they consulted what to do with the altar of burnt offerings, which was profaned, They thought it best to pull it down, lest it should be a reproach to them because the heathen had defiled it: wherefore they pulled it down, And laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place until there should come a prophet to shew what should be done with them.

Then they took whole stones according to the law, and built a new altar according to the former; And made up the sanctuary, and the things that were within the temple, and hallowed the courts. They made also new holy vessels, and into the temple they brought the candlestick, and the altar of burnt offerings, and of incense, and the table.

And upon the altar they burned incense, and the lamps that were upon the candlestick they lighted, that they might give light in the temple. Furthermore they set the loaves upon the table, and spread out the veils, and finished all the works which they had begun to make.

Now on the five and twentieth day of the ninth month, which is called the month Cisleu, in the hundred forty and eighth year, they rose up betimes in the morning and offered sacrifice according to the law upon the new altar of burnt offerings, which they had made.

Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshipping and praising the God of heaven, who had given them good success. And so they kept the altar's dedication for eight days, offered burnt offerings with gladness, and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise. They decked also the forefront of the temple with crowns of gold, and with shields; and the gates and the chambers they renewed, and hanged doors upon them.

Thus was there very great gladness among the people, for that the reproach of the heathen was put away.

Moreover Judas and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication (Chanukah) of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days, from the five and twentieth day of the month Kislev, with mirth and gladness.

In this passage, we read how Judah the Maccabee conquered and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem.

- Why did they mourn upon entering the Temple?

- What did they do to fix the Temple?
- According to the Book of Maccabees, what is the reason for celebrating Hanukkah?

Source 2: The Siddur: Al Hanissim (על הניסים)

On Hanukkah, we add a special thanksgiving prayer in the *Amidah* and *Birkat Hamazon*, thanking God for the miracle of Hanukkah. The earliest reference to this prayer is in the *Tosefta*, a Rabbinic collection of sayings edited in 200 CE. The prayer includes a description of the miracle of Hanukkah.

And we praise You for the miracles and for the redemption and for the mighty deeds and for the victories and for the battles that You performed for our fathers in those days at this time:

In the days of Mattisyahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons, when the wicked kingdom of Greece rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to stray from the laws of Your will, You, with great mercy stood by them in the time of their distress. You fought their fight, judged their cause and avenged them with vengeance. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous and the arrogant into the hands of those engaged with Your Torah. For Yourself you made a great and holy name in Your world, You performed a great deliverance for Your people Israel on this day. After these things, Your children entered into the Holy of Holies of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified the place of Your Holiness, kindled lights in Your holy courts and established these eight days of Hanukkah to express thanksgiving and praise to Your great name.)

- What are we thankful for according to this prayer?
- What is the miracle of Hanukkah?
- How is this description similar or different to the Book of Maccabees?

Source 3: The Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 21b

The Talmud was edited in 500 CE in Babylon, about 700 years after the events of the Hanukkah story. This passage gives us another reason to celebrate Hanukkah that is totally different from the previous two sources.

What is Hanukkah that our Sages taught: On the 25th of Kislev - the days of Hanukkah, they are eight, not to eulogize on them and not to fast on them. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they polluted all the oils in the Temple, and when the Hasmonean dynasty overcame and defeated them, they checked, and they found but one cruse of oil that was set in place with the seal of the High Priest, but there was in it only [enough] to light a single day. A miracle was done with it, and they lit from it for eight days. The following year, [the Sages] fixed those [days], making them holidays for Hallel and Thanksgiving.

- According to the Talmud, what is the miracle of Hanukkah?
- Do you see any references to this miracle in the previous two sources?
- Why do you think the description of the miracle of Hanukkah changed over time?
- Which of the reasons for Hanukkah do you most relate to?
- Which of the explanations is most relevant for us today?

SESSION 2: HANUKKAH AND ZIONISM



Unlike Purim, which tells the story of Jewish survival in the diaspora, Hanukkah tells the story of ancient Jews fighting for independence in the Land of Israel. This is why Hanukkah was the most popular festival for the early Zionists in Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. They believed they imitated the Maccabees in their struggle for Jewish independence in the Land of Israel. How did the early Zionists celebrate Hanukkah? What elements of the story of Hanukkah did they use to create role models for themselves?

Source 1: *We Carry Our Torches*, Aharon Ze'ev, 1936

<p>We carry our torches In the darkest depths of night. The paths beneath our feet are bright. Anyone who has a heart Which for light is parched Should lift up to us his eyes and heart. Join us towards the light!</p> <p>No miracle befell us - We found no jar of oil. We walked to the valley, climbed mountain high, And there springs unearthed. Of hidden lights of yore.</p> <p>No miracle befell us - We found no jar of oil. We quarried rock until we bled - And then there was light!</p>	<p>אָנוּ נושאים לפידים בְּלילות אֶפְלִים. זוֹרְחִים הַשְּׁבִילִים מִתַּחַת רַגְלֵינוּ וּמִי אֲשֶׁר לֵב לוֹ הַצֵּמָא לְאוֹר - יִשָּׂא אֶת עֵינָיו וְלִבּוֹ אֵלֵינוּ לְאוֹר וַיְבוֹא!</p> <p>גַּם לֹא קָרָה לָנוּ - פֶּה שָׁמֵן לֹא מָצָאנוּ. לְעֵמֶק הַלְכָנוּ, הַהָר עָלֵינוּ, מְעִינֹת הָאוֹרוֹת הַגְּנוּזִים גְּלֵינוּ.</p> <p>גַּם לֹא קָרָה לָנוּ - פֶּה שָׁמֵן לֹא מָצָאנוּ. בְּסֻלַּע הִצָּבְנוּ עַד דָּם - וַיְהִי אוֹר!</p>
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- What is the miracle of Hanukkah according to the poem?
- How does this poem represent the rebellion of Zionism against religion?
- According to the poem, who brings about miracles?
- How do you think Hanukkah remained relevant for Zionists without the miracle of Hanukkah?

Source 2: Jewish National Fund Stamp for Hanukkah, Chicago 1938



- Who is depicted in the back of the image?
- How would you describe the Zionist Pioneer in the front of the image? Why is he holding a rifle and a plow?
- Why are these two figures presented together?

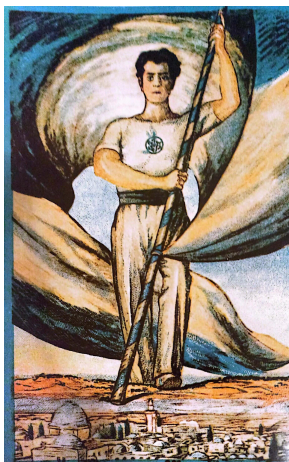
- The words דמי חנוכה (*D'mei Hanukkah*) means the value of Hanukkah. Why is the Zionist pioneer connected to the value of Hanukkah?

Source 3: Poster promoting Gadna Torch Relay Race, Galilee, Hanukkah, 1950



- Why did the Gadna youth group hold a torch relay on Hanukkah?
- How would you describe the young person holding the torch?
- What values are being promoted in this event?

Source 4: Drawing by Ludwig Blum, postcard to commemorate the Maccabi Games, Czechoslovakia, 1929



- Why do you think the Zionist movement chose the name *Maccabi* for their sports organization?
- What does the larger-than-life figure in the poster represent?
- The figure is standing over a view of Jerusalem. What does this represent?

Conclusion

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement adopted the festival of Hanukkah as a symbol of its values. These values included:

- Physical Strength
- Pride
- Fighting for Independence
- Rebellion against tyranny
- Creating independent Jewish life in the Land of Israel

- Self-reliance

Which of these values is most relevant for us today?

SESSION 3: HANUKKAH AND THE BATTLE AGAINST HELLENISM



After the Seleucid Greeks began to enforce a Hellenistic lifestyle on the Jews in the Land of Israel, the Maccabees rebelled. This was not just a cultural war but a war on the identity of what it meant to be a Jew. Why was this process of Hellenization so threatening for Jews? Why, ultimately, did the Jews prefer to fight to the death rather than accept a Hellenistic lifestyle? And to what extent is this battle against Hellenism still relevant today?

What is Hellenism?

Hellenism literally means 'Greekism'. It was an attempt to bring Greek religion and culture to the world. At the heart of Hellenism is the religious belief in a pantheon of gods. Unlike the Mesopotamian gods, who were depicted as monsters, the Greek gods were depicted in the human form. The most perfect human form that could be imagined. The most beautiful. The wisest. The strongest. The most powerful.

For the Greeks, worshiping these gods meant imitating them. Humans could become godlike if they became the wisest, the most beautiful, or the strongest. Humans could become gods by becoming the most perfect human.

This religious idea resulted in the enormous contribution of the Greeks to Western Civilization, including philosophy, theatre, sport, architecture, and politics.

Why was this a threat to Judaism?

The perfection of the human body meant that the human form must not be mutilated in any way, including circumcision. To be a true Hellenist meant for Jews the rejection of entering the ancestral covenant that we call *Brit Millah*. This was not just symbolic of how Hellenism conflicted with Judaism. In the Jewish approach to life, only the One True God can be perfect, not humans. God's creations can never be perfect; humans must instead work towards fixing this imperfect, broken world.

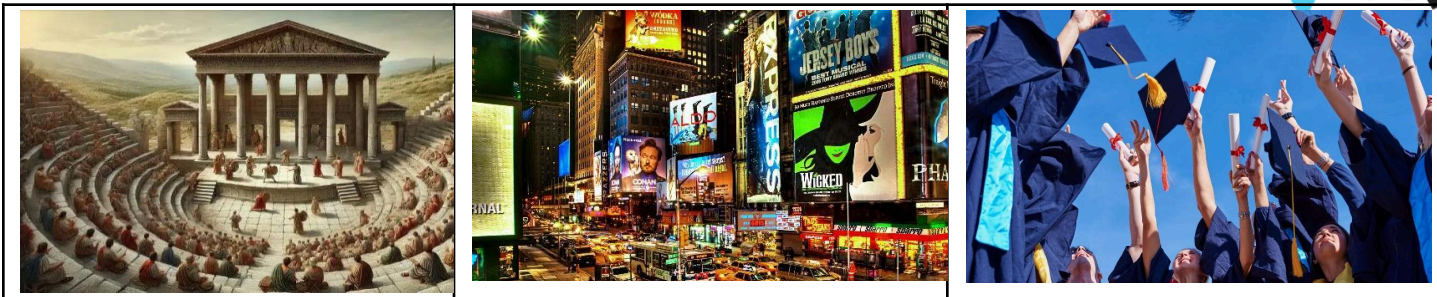
If the Hellenists emphasized grasping the truth through philosophy, Judaism emphasized action. If the Hellenists emphasized beauty, Judaism emphasized behavior. For the Hellenists, power through politics was the goal; for the Jews, it was justice. The Greek hero is the strongest; the Jewish hero is the kindest.

The Maccabees rejected Hellenism. But what about us? Hellenism certainly comes across as more fun. Can we be composite beings and straddle both worlds, or must we choose between Hellenism or Judaism?

Activity 1

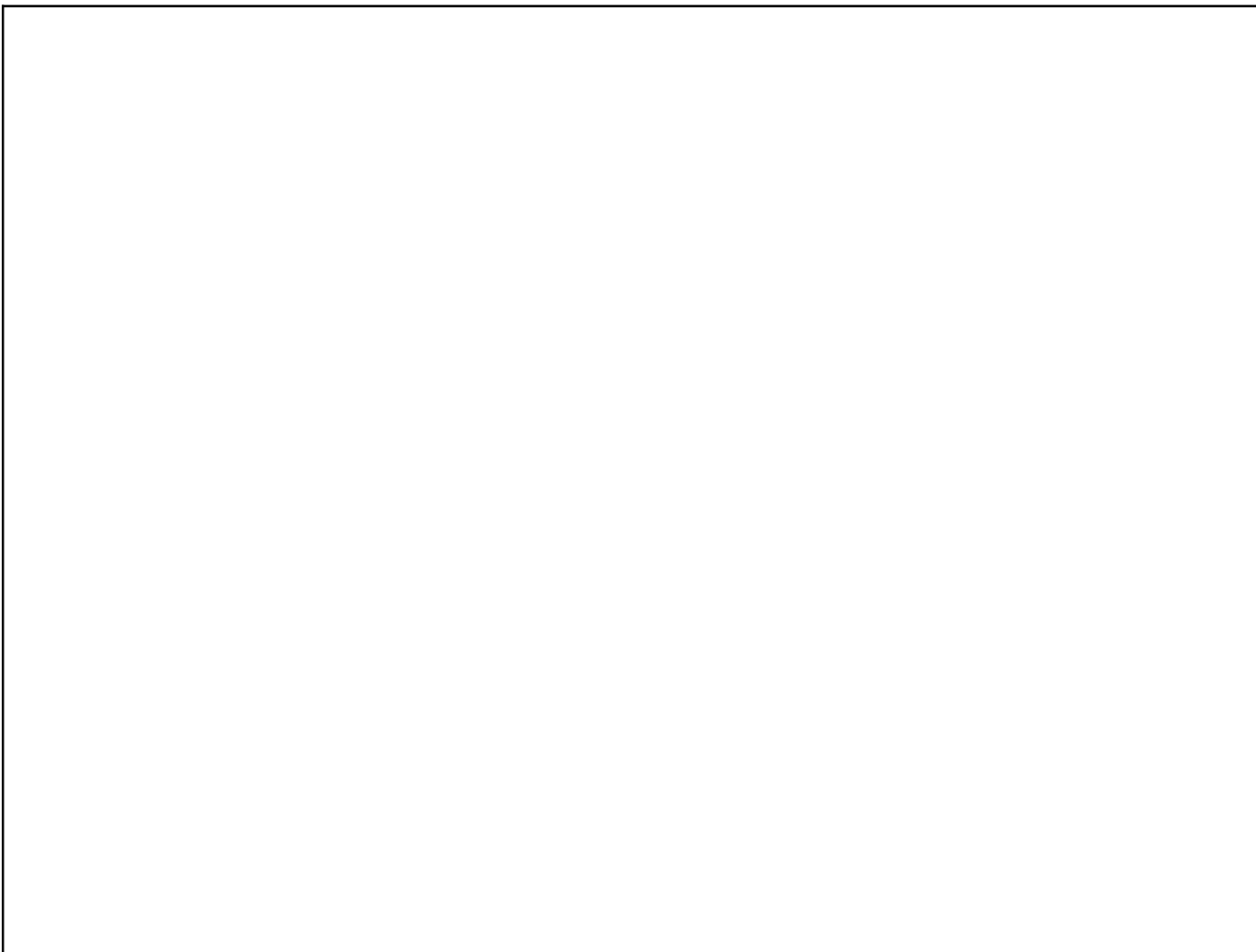
Cut out the following images. Ask the group to organize the Greek image alongside the equivalent modern parallel. Then, ask the group to rate the images according to what they consider most important to them.





Activity 2

Ask participants to draw a cartoon of the ideal American teenager. What does society expect teenagers to look like? What clothes should they wear? What should their bodies look like? What do they own? What are they good at? What do they do in their spare time?



After drawing, ask participants to present their cartoons. Do they like the person they have drawn? Do they aspire to be like them?

Conclusion

- What elements of modern culture are like Hellenistic culture?
- What of these do you like/dislike?
- What elements of Jewish life would you compromise on to live a modern life?
- What elements of Jewish life would you **not** compromise on to live a modern life?
- How should we celebrate Hanukkah to emphasize unique Jewish identity?