

The Jewish Cultural Civil War and the Reinvention of Hanukkah in the Twentieth Century:

Who are the Children of Light and Who, the Prince of Darkness?

Four Contemporary Interpretations of Hanukkah
Candles and Ethical Traits:
Zionist, Classical Reform, Hassidic, and Jewish Renewal

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A. Mattathias: The First Rebel (167-166 BCE) – Our Hero?

In those days [of religious persecution by King Antiochus], a priest named **Mattathias** moved from Jerusalem, and settled in Modiin [a provincial town]. He had five sons, John, Simon, Judah called Maccabeus, Elazar, and Jonathan. When he saw the blasphemous things that were going on in Judea and Jerusalem, he said with a heavy sigh, “Why was I born to witness the ruin of my people and the ruin of the Holy City, and to sit by while it is being given up to its enemies, and its Temple to aliens?” Mattathias and his sons tore their clothes in mourning...

Later the king’s officers, who were forcing the people to give up their religion, came to the town of **Modiin**, to make them offer an idolatrous sacrifice. When many Jews, among them Mattathias and his sons, gathered together, the king’s messengers said to Mattathias:

“You are a leading man, great and distinguished in this town, surrounded with sons and brothers; now be the first to come forward and carry out the king’s command as all the peoples, all the men of Judea and those who are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be counted among the Friends of the King and will receive silver, gold and many royal commissions.”

Then Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: “Even if all the peoples in the king’s dominions listen to him and forsake each of them the religion of their ancestors, **I and my children and my siblings will live in accordance with the covenant of our ancestors**. God forbid that we should abandon the Torah and the ordinances. We will not listen to the message of the king, nor depart from our religion to the right hand or to the left.”

When Mattathias finished speaking, a Jew went up before everyone’s eyes to offer the pagan sacrifice on the altar in Modiin as the king commanded. Mattathias saw him and was filled with zeal. Mattathias shook with emotion and could not contain his anger, and ran up and slaughtered him upon the altar. At the same time Mattathias killed the king’s officer who was trying to compel them to sacrifice, and tore down the altar. Thus he showed his zeal for the Torah, just as **Pinchas [the zealous priest]** did (*Numbers 25*). Then Mattathias cried out in a loud voice in the town, “**Let everybody who is zealous for the Torah and stands by the Covenant follow me.**” And he and his sons fled to the mountains and left all they possessed in the town.

A Radical Religious Reform*

When Mattathias and his friends learned of [the massacre], they grieved bitterly and said to one another: “**If we all do as our brothers have done and refuse to fight [on Shabbat] against the pagans, for our lives and for what we believe is right, they will very soon wipe us off the face of the earth.**” On that day they reached this decision: “**If anyone attacks us on Shabbat, let us fight against them and not all die, as our brothers died in the hiding places.**” (*I Maccabees 2: 29-41*)

1. What did King Antiochus's officers want from Mattathias and why did he refuse? Why did Mattathias kill the Jew who wanted to collaborate with the Greek-Syrians? (If you want to understand the policy of Antiochus better, see "The Decrees of Antiochus IV, below)
2. This is a problematic tale for those of us who believe in religious freedom. Would you be comfortable reading this story to your children/grandchildren and portraying Mattathias as a Jewish hero?

* The Talmudic Rabbis later argued that these martyrs who refused to violate Shabbat even for self-defense had misunderstood God’s intent. “*Pikuach Nefesh*,” saving a life in threatening situations, always takes precedence over Shabbat observance.

The Decrees of Antiochus IV (167BCE - 164 BCE)

1. No Jewish sacrifices may be offered in the Temple of God. Instead, mandatory sacrifices of pigs and impure animals were dedicated to Zeus on the Temple's altar.
2. Pagan temples were to be built throughout Judea.
3. No circumcisions were allowed on pain of death to child, parent and *mohel*.
4. The Torah was to be forgotten and its legal system replaced with Greek law.
5. Shabbat and holidays were to be desecrated.
6. The celebration of the Emperor's birthday was enforced including the eating of sacrifices made in his honor.
7. Participation in Dionysian processions crowned with ivy wreaths was required.
8. It was prohibited to identify oneself as a Jew (including, perhaps, the prohibition of the use of Jewish names) (see Sidebar entitled "Sticks and Stones").



B. The Secular Zionist Hanukkah versus the Haredi UltraOrthodox Hannukah

The Israeli Politics of Observance: Remembering the Maccabees in a Partisan Way

“The Maccabees will be resurrected!” - Theodore Herzl (concluding sentence of his prophetic book, *The Jewish State*, 1897)

Writing History is a Self-Projection on the Past

By Ehud Luz

History is a mirror by which we can view ourselves... The motive for our interest in history is to interpret our life ideal and to prove that the ideal is achievable in reality in the future just as it once was a fact of history. This approach is especially relevant for Revivalist Movements that seek to shape the future in the image of the past. Revival is never a simple return to the past but always a reflective dialogue in which the present seeks to shape the future in the image of a particular past which it has reconstructed in its own image. We turn to the past to derive a concrete model of our soul's dream and the faith that the dream is realizable. The past is an interpretation and a justification for our aspirations. In this sense, modern study of history functions like ancient myths. Myth gave meaning to one's private life by anchoring it in the eternal comprehensive lawfulness of life. What is ephemeral is really an example of the eternal; private life is a repetition and a revival of a holy event that belongs to eternity...

Therefore the myth of “revival” plays such a central role in the national awakening of historical peoples in the 19th-20th century. Historical romanticism is the cradle of modern nationalism because the past is mythic and eternal and it grants the power of renewal to the present.

The Secularization of Hanukkah

Of all the historic symbols used by modern Zionism, none is as important as “the Maccabees”. The rabbinic religious tradition – in so far as it recalled the Hasmoneans at all – emphasized the religious miracle in their battle against persecution of Judaism and the desecration of the Temple (see the traditional prayer “*Al HaNissim*”). However the Secular Zionists rejected the miracle and emphasized the earthly realism of Hasmonean heroism. Zionism made Hanukkah a nationalist holiday... the secularization and nationalization of religious celebrations focused on minor religious holidays and reprioritized their significance.

Lag BaOmer became a celebration of Bar Kochba's revolt against the Roman Empire (132-135 CE); Tu B'Shvat became a celebration of the redemption of Eretz Yisrael (through reforestation). However, Hanukkah was the main site of national re-creation. The early religious Zionist Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever proposed that Hanukkah be the official holiday of the proto Zionist organization in Russia – Hovevei Zion (1881)... this minor holiday provided neutral ground for religious and secular Zionists to share their nationalist program.

המקבי – מילה יוונית שמשמעותה פטיש, כלומר, ראש בצורת פטיש או פעילות צבאית יזומה שמזכירה פעולת פטיש. 'יהודה המקבי' = 'יהודה הפטיש'.

מכבי"י = 'מי כמוכה באלים ה'", דרשה רבנית המדגישה שליהודה בנו של מתתיהו הכהן היה מניע רחבני. כתיב זה מדגיש את העזרה האלוהית במלחמה ע"י אותו אלוהים שהביס את המצרים בים סוף ושעליו נאמר שם – "ה' איש מלחמה" וכן "מי כמוכה באלים ה'" (שמות ט"ו)



Hanukkah Displaces Pesach as the Holiday of Freedom

While traditionally Pesach has been the holiday of national liberation, its family observance and its exclusive emphasis on God's supernatural redemption, could not serve the Zionist slogans of "auto emancipation" and "if I do not do for myself, who will do for me?"

Yitzhak Ben Zvi, early pioneer and later second president of the State of Israel, wrote in 1911: "The glory and the educational value of the Hasmoneans is that their example revived the nation to be its own redeemer and the determiner of its own future..."

אליעזר בן יהודה, מחייה השפה העברית, שכל חייו לחמו בו החרדים האנטי-ציוניים בירושלים.

החשמונאים נטלו גורלם בידיהם, ואילו יציאת מצרים נכפתה על העם הר כגיגית...

חנוכה הוא "זמן חרותנו" ולא פסח!

The Secular "Hanukkah" becomes the "Festival of the Hasmoneans"

While the Rabbis use the Hebrew word "*Hanukkah*" (which means "dedication") which refers to the religious dedication of the Temple in the wake of its liberation from the control of the Hellenizers, the preferred Zionist name was once the "Festival of the Hasmoneans". The historian, Joseph Klausner, Amos Oz's uncle who was one of the mentors of the Revisionist movement, stated:

"Hanukkah is an ancient festival, but a modest one. The Festival of the Hasmoneans is a new holy day, but full of high spirits and popular gaiety. **What was Hanukkah?**... ' a memorial for the Miracles'... the lighting of the little candles... at home, potato pancakes and playing cards for the adults, spinning tops for the toddlers.

And what is Hanukkah now? – The Festival of the Hasmoneans, a holiday filled with cheering, a big national holiday which is celebrated by the Jewish people in all its dispersions with parties and speeches, songs and ballads, hikes and parades... This is our Festival of the Hasmoneans as it is today."

זרובבל, אחד מאבות הציונות המודרנית, המתייחס בדבריו לקברי

המכבים המצויים באזור מודיעין (קברים אלו הפכו למקום עליה לרגל של תנועות נוער ציוניות

במאה העשרים) ועליהם הוא אומר:

"לא בתפילות הסתפקו החשמונאים. את דמם שפכו בעד החופש העממי, ורגשות מלחמה מעוררים קבריהם

בלבבות היהודים החדשים בארץ מולדת הישנה".



New Songs: "No Miracle Occurred"

Anu nos'im lapidim ("We are carrying torches"), the lyrics to which were written by the poet "Ze'ev" (Aharon Ze'ev, 1900-1968) and published in 1951

"We are carrying torches. In the dark night the paths shine beneath our feet, and whoever has a heart that thirsts for light--let him lift his eyes and his heart to us and come along.
No miracle happened for us. No cruise of oil did we find.
We walked through the valley, ascended the mountain. We discovered wellsprings of hidden light. We quarried in the stone until we bled:
"Let there be light!"

The miracle of the cruise of oil was openly belittled since it was believed that it was a salient example of the passive approach, which characterized traditional Diaspora Jewry. Indeed, a popular song, widely heard during Hanukkah, states: "**No miracle befell us, no cruse of oil did we find**". The divine intervention of the Lord was replaced by reference to the heroic people who delivered the Jewish community by their own courage and strength. A children's song chanted on Hanukkah altered the Biblical verse: 'Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord?' (Psalms, 106:2) to 'Who can recount the exploits of Israel?*' The very name "Maccabees," traditionally considered to be an acronym for the verse, 'Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods?' (Exodus, 15:11) was given a new rendition by a Zionist functionary: 'Who is like unto thee among the nations, Israel?'



A Biblical Psalm becomes a Secular Song:

MI Y'MALEL – An Early Zionist Folksong

Who can tell the mighty acts of Israel,

Who can count them?

In every age a hero rises to save the nation.

Hark! In those days at this time, a Maccabee overcame and redeemed.

And in our day the whole nation of Israel will be united and rise to be redeemed.

Psalms 106

Hallelujah.

Praise the Lord for God is good;

God's steadfast love is eternal.

Who can tell the mighty acts of the Eternal, proclaim all God's praises?

God saved [our ancestors], as befits God's name...

God delivered them from the foe,

Redeemed them for the enemy.

(א) הללויה הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו:

(ב) מי ימלל גבורות ידוד ישמיע כל תהלתו:

... (ח) ויושיעם למען שמו להודיע את גבורתו:

Traditional practices in the celebration of the festival, such as the lighting of the candles in the **Menorah** (candelabrum), were observed but they were reinterpreted: the candles were said not to be in memory of the miracle of the cruse of oil, but to betoken the light of national deliverance. Furthermore, the ceremony of lighting the candles which traditionally took place in the home was now observed in the town square or other places of public assembly; and instead of the traditional blessings, there were speeches, declarations, and songs of a national-political character, and torches were lit and were carried through the streets in festive parades. One elaborate event was a pilgrimage to Modiin where members of the youth movement, Maccabee, lit a torch and relayed it in a marathon to light Hanukkah candles along the way. On the first occasion of such a ceremony in Modiin, the audience was told that the torch which was being kindled there would be carried by runners who were the descendants of the Maccabees 'not only to light the Hanukkah candles but to light up the hearts of Hebrew youth and to herald unity and national action'. [Ironically] the Modiin marathon [a Greek term and institution] became part of a series of sports events which were held during the Hanukkah period.



Haredim (Ultra Orthodox) Condemn the Zionists

The traditional concept of Hanukkah stressed the miraculous salvation from above, in contrast to the Zionist emphasis on the theme of the self-liberation. This clash between the two approaches to the festival was apparent from the very beginning of modern Zionism. In 1903, a rabbi deplored the actions of the Zionists who, he claimed:

"Magnified the festival of the Maccabees and augmented their strength and power, and this is truly a great mistake... For under natural conditions they were incapable of winning the war, and [they were victorious] only because they were completely righteous men and sought with selfless devotion to save our sacred religion."

The fiercest opponents of the Zionist version of Hanukkah were the Haredim, who also dismissed Zionism as a movement, which ran counter to the spirit of religious tradition. They claimed that the manner of the Zionist celebrations of Hanukkah was closer to the outlook of the Hellenizers than it was to that of the Hasmoneans, although the Zionists were pretending to be praising the latter. They added that the Zionists expressed admiration for the values fostered by the Hellenizers under the influence of a foreign culture, such as the worship of physical strength. Yitzhak Breuer, a major Haredi leader, commented:

"The Hellenizers loved their people and their land in their own fashion... They loved the land, but loathed the Land of Torah, loved the people but despised the People of the Torah, loved the Greek licentiousness but hated the burden of Torah... It is not for the Jewish State that the Hasmoneans fought but for the People of the Torah. They did battle against the kingdom of evil when it threatened the People of the Torah with destruction... They also fought against the wicked among their own people... This was a *kulturkampf* [a clash between two cultures] ... Greek culture triumphed over the whole world, and only the Torah culture was able to withstand it."

However, the traditional prayers also reflect a military victory that the anti-Zionist Haredim de-emphasize:

"הנרות הללו אנחנו מדליקים על הנסים ועל הנפלאות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות, **שעשית** (ה') לאבותינו

בימים ההם בזמן הזה, **על ידי כהניך הקדושים**"

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון [שמונה הם], דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון [שלא מספידים בהם ולא מתענים בהם]. שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאו ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.



C.A Reform Children's Curriculum for Hanukkah

There are elements in Hanukkah that could be difficult for Reform Jews to adopt because of their emphasis on the Temple, on political independence of the Jewish nation, on the negative image of Western culture (Hellenism) as a coercive source of assimilation, and on the military heroism of the Maccabees. In contrast, freedom of conscience, faith in God and ethics have been central Reform values.

*Thus it should not be surprising that Isaac M. Wise, who introduced Reform Judaism in the United States and founded its major institutions, suggested in 1865 the elimination of the Hanukkah lights. However, six years later the Augsburg Synod, with delegates mostly from German Reform congregations, introduced a resolution urging the appropriate commemoration of Hanukkah, which had been neglected in many Reform Jewish congregations and schools. The rationale for this resolution was to counteract the celebration of Christmas by many Jewish families “in direct opposition to Jewish consciousness.” (from *The Hanukkah Anthology* by Phillip Goodman).*

A hundred years later, American Jews continue to give great significance to Hanukkah as a counter weight to Christmas. Consistent with the Reform movement's essential values, the curricular efforts of 1971 and 1993 of two of its Reform educators sought to retool the meaning of the holiday to emphasize peace, not war and religious freedom, not traditional religious rituals. Read these familiar retellings of the story for children carefully and try to discover the educational message of the authors.

A Reform Movement Hanukkah Curriculum for School Children: The Anti-War Celebration of the Maccabees (1971) by Harry Gersh* Freedom of Worship

Jewish holidays have to do with nature and God, with the growth of crops and the growth of the Jewish people. **Only one Jewish holiday – Hanukkah – centers about a war.** Even that one does not celebrate victory but cleaning the Temple and dedicating it once again.

Jews never take up the sword willingly. No one can take joy in the death of another human being. But sometimes we have no choice. We must stop and fight those who would deny us the freedom to be Jews. If we do not, we are, in effect, agreeing to become slaves.

That's why Mattathias, the priest of Modiin, is the real hero of Hanukkah. He had the courage to stand up to the Syrians. **Mattathias did not want war. When many people shouted for war, Mattathias ran away from Jerusalem hoping to avoid war.** But when he found that meant he would have to give up his Judaism he knew what he had to do. If war and death were the price the Jews had to pay for the right to be Jews, then war and death it would be.

Two thousand years before Abraham Lincoln said that a nation cannot endure half slave and half free, Mattathias, the priest of Modiin, sent his five sons into war against the Syrians because he knew that the Jews could not exist half slave and half free.

When Antiochus' soldiers came to the village of Modiin, Mattathias stood firm. The Book of Maccabees (in the Apocrypha) tells what he said:

Even if all the nations within the king's empire listen to him and give up, each its own faith, yet will I and my sons and my brothers follow the Covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we give up the Torah and the Commandments. We will not listen to the king's words, to leave our faith... Let all who will obey the Torah and keep the Commandments follow me.



Mattathias and his sons fought with the Syrian soldiers and drove them from Modiin. And the war began. Mattathias' son Judah gathered together groups of Jews and created an army in the hills of Judea. For three years they fought and beat the Syrians. As winter came in 165 BCE, Judah's soldiers entered Jerusalem and then Judah's army came to the Temple. The great stone altar stood there, with a great statue of Zeus – or was it Antiochus?

Cleansing the Temple

The soldiers threw down their arms and began to clean the Temple. The idols were thrown out and everything cleaned. Priests and Levites came forward from among the soldiers, and animals for sacrifices were brought. All was ready for the beginning of services – except for the great menorah. One legend says that then the soldiers found eight iron rods stuck in the walls. They put them together in the shape of a menorah and lit candles in them.

And on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, exactly three years to the day from the day the Temple was taken over by the Syrians, the Temple services were held. **Each soldier waved a palm branch instead of a sword.** For many years after the end of that war of independence the Jews celebrated Hanukkah. But it was a kind of old soldiers' holiday, when those who fought the war got together and recounted their battles and victories. As these soldiers died, the holiday became less important.

The sons and grandsons of Mattathias died, and new kings ruled the Jews. Like so many kings, they became tyrants. The Jew in the street cursed the Hasmonean tyrants and would not celebrate the holiday of the victory of the Hasmoneans.

The Legend of the Oil

Then the Hasmonean kings were pushed off the throne by the Romans. Foreigners ruled the Jews and they were cruel. The Jews hated them and wanted to rebel. Now the people began to remember their last fight for freedom, from Antiochus. And they remembered Hanukkah. New stories and legends began to grow up around this great victory. That may be when the story about the oil was born. It explained why Hanukkah is eight days and not just a week... The spears and torches legend is another. We don't know which one is exactly true. But it doesn't much matter. Sometimes there's more real truth in the legends than in the bare facts of history.

The Right to Worship

Today some people try to use Hanukkah to show that the Jews were a warrior people. They were not. **Most Jews in all ages thought war was stupid.** The great men of the Jews were not warriors. They were men of learning, lawgivers, wise men. In a period of about 1,500 years there were only four great generals among the Jews. Two of them are not thought of as generals, Joshua and David. Only Judah Maccabee and Bar Kokhba are remembered as warriors, and they are more important to us today, because our times are so troubled, than they were to the Jewish tradition.

Some people try to change the meaning of Hanukkah so that it celebrates a war for independence. It wasn't. The Jews would rather have had their own government and king, but they did not go to war over politics. As a matter of fact, they accepted Antiochus; they accepted his taxes, even when he taxed the Temple. But they would not accept his interference with their worship, their belief, their religion.

Freedom to Serve God



So this war was the first for the right of a people within a country to believe as they wish – so long as they followed the king’s law in worldly matters. For thousands of years, Jews have lived under kings, princes, dukes, caliphs, governors, presidents. And they have always been loyal to these rulers – so long as they were permitted to practice their own religion. **This idea of religious freedom is followed in all free nations today. It was first given to the world by the Jews.**

One thing more: Antiochus offered the Jews complete equality with all the rest of his subjects – so long as they would agree to *be* like all his other subjects. He said: If you Jews become like all my other people, you can enjoy all the rights my other subjects have. So the Jews fought, not for equality, but for the right to be different.

For Jews life is very, very important. But it is not the most important thing. Jews will *not* do *anything* to survive. For some things one must stand up and not give in. The Maccabees risked their lives for freedom to serve God.

That’s why the festival of Hanukkah does not take place on the day of a great battle. It does not take place on the day the Jews re-conquered Jerusalem. It takes place during the week that the Temple was cleansed and a new fire lighted in the menorah. Such a day is so important that it must be celebrated.

This is the meaning of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is a **Festival of Dedication**. It reminds us of the value of freedom of worship. It recalls our dedication to God.

**Another Reform Curriculum for Hanukkah (1993):
Assimilating yet Drawing the Line – “No compromises on our inner faith!” by Adam Fisher***

Many Jews also followed Greek ways. But there was one thing the Jews would not do. They would not worship the Greek gods. No matter what the Jews looked like on the outside, on the inside they remained faithful to God. (*Student Book*)

Student Exercise

Begin by explaining that it is usually a good idea to follow rules and accept regulations that are imposed upon us by parents, school officials, government, and so on. But there are exceptions when we know that a rule or regulation is wrong. At those times we need to speak out against it, rather than just to continue doing the wrong thing.

Come to class prepared to relate an experience you had when you were forced to speak out against something you felt was wrong. Try to make it something on the students’ level so that they will be able to appreciate it fully.

Many Jews also followed Greek ways... What were some Greek things that Jews began to do? (Speak and read Greek, study Greek art and music, play Greek games, learn Greek math.) Do we do some Christian things because we live near many Christians? In what ways is this good? In what ways is this not a good thing? (Try to steer the discussion toward expressing that we can learn from others and absorb new things as long as we don’t compromise ourselves and our beliefs.) You can also express that it is important for others to learn from us. (*Teachers’ Guide*)

* *My Jewish Year*, Behrman House, 1993, p.61.



D. The Hassidic Hanukkah of Lubavitch (Habad) and Gur: The Inward and the Outward Light of our Souls

Hassidism has long sought the spiritual meaning of Jewish rituals and events, interpreting them both literally and allegorically, as referring to psychological and spiritual processes within the cosmos, history and the individual. Generally Hassidim have been spiritual activists who believe that by the proper channelling of spiritual intentions (kavanot) they can transform themselves and the cosmos in a redemptive way.

We have selected two Hassidic interpretations of the lighting of the menorah – one from Hassidism of Lubavitch and one from Gur. Although the reader will see a familiar story retold the special value emphasis of each Hassidic school will become apparent.

***Lubavitch** is the town in Lithuania where the Habad movement developed. In recent years Lubavitch Hassidism has been involved in a redemptive and sometimes messianic campaign to redeem every assimilated Jew, every Divine spark in the world and thereby the cosmos. Lubavitch is well-known for its missionary activity to Jews seeking to bring them to observe at least one mitzvah. The lighting of a giant menorah in the public square has become a central event, even though it is not a halachic act since the menorah is meant to be lit at home. Therefore it is characteristic of their worldview that they promote public candle lighting ceremonies at the White House, on highways and on satellite television as an analogue for their own mission to publicize God's hidden miracles and help each Jew to discover the Divine spark hidden within. The need to publicize Judaism in a Westernized assimilated world has required ultra Orthodox Habad students and rabbis to come into much greater contact with what they consider a pagan world, than any other Ultra Orthodox groups. The texts we have chosen include selections from the most recent Lubavitcher Rebbe's talks (sichot) on Hanukkah as well as from a popular book on the holidays prepared for students and their teachers.*

What Is A Lubavitch Hassid? A Lamplighter

by R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson [Lubavitcher Rebbe from 1950-1994]*

My father-in-law reported this conversation with his own father Rebbe Sholom Dov-Ber then the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

The Hassid asked: Rebbe, what is a Hassid?

The Rebbe answered: A Hassid is a streetlamp lighter.

In olden days, there was a person in every town who would light the gas street-lamps with a light he carried at the end of a long pole. On the street corners, the lamps were there in readiness, waiting to be lit; A streetlamp lighter has a pole with fire. He knows that the fire is not his own, and he goes around lighting all lamps on his route."

Today, the lamps are there, but they need to be lit. It is written, "*The soul of man is a lamp of G-d*" (Proverbs 20:27), and it is also written, "*A mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light*" (Proverbs 6:23). A Hassid is one who puts personal affairs aside and goes around lighting up the souls of Jews with the light of Torah and *mitzvot*. Jewish souls are in readiness to be lit. Sometimes they are around the corner. Sometimes they are in a wilderness or at sea. But there must be someone who disregards personal comforts and conveniences and goes out to ignite these lamps with his or her flame. That is the function of a true Hassid.

Hassidism in general demands that one disseminate Torah and Yiddishkeit all over and seek to benefit fellow Jews. In the words of R. Sholom Dov-Ber: "A Hassid is he who surrenders his self to seeking the welfare of another." Over and beyond that, Chabad demands *pnimiyut* (inwardness): one should not act superficially, as a mere act of faith, but with inner conviction, with the soul-faculties



of HaBaD (*Hochma* – conceptual wisdom; *Bina* – comprehensive understanding and *Da'at* – penetrating analytic knowledge).

The message is obvious. This function is not really limited to Hassidim, but is the function of every Jew. Divine Providence brings Jews to the most unexpected, remote places, in order that they carry out this purpose of lighting up the world.

May God grant that each and every one of us be a dedicated "lamplighter," and fulfill his or her duty with joy and gladness of heart."

Candle Lighting by Satellite (1992): An Address by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Recently we can "*proclaim and propagate the miracle*" world over using a satellite or other scientific inventions to honor God, because as the Rabbis said "*everything God created in the world was for his honor*" (*Pirkei Avot* 6).

In fact the ability to see visually by satellite how one person, even a child, can light a candle seen round the world instantaneously teaches us that it is within the power of each one of us to light up the whole world. By satellite we can unite Jews all over the world no matter how dispersed, thus Hanukkah teaches the oneness of Israel, of God and of Torah.

The satellite connection teaches the Jews that what happens in one place can have an effect in any other place, what happens in heaven (satellite) can have an effect on what happens on earth. If it is a mitzvah "to place the candle on the outside of one's doorway to proclaim the miracle," then even more so is it a mitzvah to place it "outside" in a central public space for even greater "proclamation of the miracle" – including for the nations of the world, for they too are commanded to observe Torah, the laws of Noah. Of course one's house should also be a source of light for one's environment – a house filled with inner spiritual light of Torah, prayer and loving kindness.

The Hanukkah candles we light are comprised of two aspects; a) illuminating the world during the time of exile, and thereby b) preparing the world for the coming redemption.

These dimensions are reflected in the setting of our present gathering: The time is the eighth day of Hanukkah, the final night of the kindling of the Hanukkah candles when all the eight candles of the Menorah are lit. The place is a synagogue where Jews gather together in prayer, and at this time, also recite the special prayer for the Hanukkah festival; and similarly, the participants are Jews of all ages, but primarily Jewish children.

Kindling Hanukkah Lights Today, Illuminating the Exile

The Hanukkah candles are lit for eight days. This does not mean that the same mitzvah is repeated eight times in succession. Just as in a physical sense new candles are lit each night, so it is in a spiritual sense, every night a new mitzvah is fulfilled with new fire. Also, each night we add another candle, indicating how we must constantly increase our efforts to spread light. The Hanukkah lights reflect the fire with the Jewish soul, as it is written, "*The soul of man is the lamp of God.*" Each person possesses this light within his body. Hanukkah teaches how this light must be ignited and shine forth and how it must be renewed and increased each day.

The Hanukkah candles are to be placed "at the outside of the entrance to one's home." This indicates how the light of a person's soul should shine not only within the confines of his own being, but must also be projected outward, thereby illuminating his environment and filling it with light.

The kindling of each person's individual Menorah, the fire of his soul, leads also to the kindling of the collective Menorah, the Jewish people. The light they produce is, as explained above, not self-



contained, but rather shines “outside” and illuminates the world at large, spreading light in the totality of the darkness of exile

Projecting light to the world at large is the underlying intent of all the mitzvos, as it is written, “*A mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light.*” However, to a greater degree than in other mitzvos, this intent is reflected in the Hanukkah candles, for they produce visible light and they spread that light throughout their surroundings. The culmination of this process is the lighting of the eighth candle. It symbolizes the entire exile which can be illuminated by “*the candle of mitzvah and the light of Torah.*”

Our Children, the Lights within the Exile

The darkness of exile is in fact being illuminated. Proof of this is that the majority of the participants in this gathering are children. Children perpetuate the golden chain of our people’s bond with the Torah and its mitzvos. The fact that our children accept their responsibilities as ***Tzivos HaShem*** (“**God’s army**”) demonstrates how “the lamp of mitzvah” and “the light of Torah” are spreading throughout the world.

This special quality of children is also reflected in the very name of the festival, for ***Hanukkah*** is also related to the word ***Hinuch***, meaning “**education.**” It is written, “*Educate a child according to his way [so that] even when he grows older he will not depart from it.*” This points to the unique role of childhood in, and the effect it has on all stages of one’s life. It is the experience and training during one’s childhood which effects the entire life of the person. Therefore, when we see the excitement of children participating in this gathering, we are certain that this will be carried into all different stages of their lives.

The emphasis on the future is also reflected in the kindling of the Hanukkah candles in a synagogue, when we recite together the festive prayer *Al Hanissim*. This prayer praises God for the miracles and wonders He performed “*in those days, at this time.*” But it also expresses our hope that Moshiach [the messiah] will come and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash [the Temple], so that “*at this time*”, and in our days, in these days of Hanukkah, we can, as the Maccabees did in their times, “*kindle lights in Your holy courtyard.*”

Bringing the Redemption Near, Through Tzedakah

The preparation of the world for the era of redemption is enhanced by the mitzvah of Tzedakah (charity). In particular, this is accomplished by children, for we find a unique quality in the Tzedakah given by a child, which is not found in the Tzedakah given by an adult.

Also, adults work to earn their livelihood, and thus can perhaps replace the money that they have given away. In contrast, children do not earn their own money and have only what they have been given by their parents. Nevertheless, we see that a child gives generously. Furthermore, in keeping with the Hanukkah lesson of increasing light, a child does not remain satisfied with giving once, but continues to give many times. And most importantly, the child gives with joy, happy at the opportunity to fulfill God’s will. Indeed, a child’s eagerness and joy in the performance of this mitzvah should serve as lessons for his or her parents, inducing them to emulate these qualities in their observance of the mitzvos.



At the conclusion of this gathering, each child will be given three coins as Hanukkah *gelt*. Our Sages associate the number three with a *chazakah*, a sequence that firmly establishes a lasting practice. This word also signifies strength and is reflected in the Jewish people's growing stronger from day to day in their observance of the Torah and its mitzvos. A fourth coin will also be given to you, for you to give to Tzedakah, preferably together with additional money of your own. When the number four is doubled, the sum is eight, a number also associated with the future redemption.

The Menorah Around the World Lights the Path for the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash

Through telecommunication, we have just witnessed how the Jewish people, dispersed as they are throughout the entire world, have gathered together to kindle the Hanukkah Menorah, joining the individual lights of their souls together into the larger torch. The fusion of all these lights reflects the kindling of the worldwide Menorah, the Jewish people. Its fusion shines "*at the outside of the entrance to one's home,*" kindling the fire in the hearts of other people, inspiring them to light their own menorahs, and illuminating the world at large.

May the merit of these achievements and the resolve to increase efforts to reach out, even to those who may not of yet been reached, cause God to grant our prayer and bring the coming Redemption so that "*at this time*", now in our days, we will "*kindle the lights in Your holy courtyard,*" in the courtyard of the Third Beis HaMikdash.

The Light of Lubavitch* : The Inner Light of Judaism against the Outer Darkness of the West

The Messianic Menorah and the Mission of the Jew

There are two basic differences between the Hanukkah candles we light today at home and the Temple menorah lit in the days of the Temple. First, the Temple menorah is lit **inside**, while the Hanukkah menorah is lit in order to shine **outside**. Second, the Temple menorah is lit while still daylight, while the Hanukkah menorah is lit when it is dark, after sunset.

Remember that the "light" symbolizes the holy Torah and its commandments, as it says, "the candle of mitzvah and the light of Torah". The "darkness" is the absence of Torah. The "inside" is the inner spirituality of Torah, while the "outside" is the material world.

The message of Hanukkah is our obligation to propagate the "light of the Torah" into the "outside" which is still without Torah. Torah and the Jewish way of life are not meant to be confined "inside" on holy days or holy places but rather to fill every moment and every place whether at home, at school or in the market place. It is our mission to shine our inner light into the material world, even in public spaces.

Just as an added candle is lit on every night of Hanukkah, so each one of us must add to the light of Torah in the world. If each of us does his duty then we can confidently expect the Fulfillment of Divine promise that "night will be as light as day" (Psalms 139). Then the end of our dark exile is near and the light of our messiah will shine over the darkness of the nations, then the Third Temple will be built, the Temple menorah will be lit and never again be extinguished.

The Error of Greek Ways

Some people think that Hanukkah is chiefly about a **military** victory. However while the military victory was essential, it was a means to the final purpose of purifying the Temple, spiritual survival. In short, the point is to remove Greek pagan influence and spread light of holiness.



Greek culture has two faces. **Outwardly** it is brilliant and attractive. **Inwardly** it is rotten and corrupt. It is the culture of sports, circuses and theater. Nevertheless, even in Eretz Yisrael there were Jews who wanted to assimilate, “to live it up” as Hellenists.

However, the lesson of Hanukkah is “not to be impressed by the majority” and not to be swept up. An observant Jew can survive as the only Jew in the city. He must see himself as the little candle, the single cruse of oil, lighting up the great darkness. The nature of a candle is that one can light more and more candles (souls) from it – endlessly.

The Greeks made a gross error when they persecuted the Jews. They didn’t know that when one “presses” on a Jew to abandon the faith of his/her ancestors, then precisely at that moment the “pintele Yid” – the Jewish inner point is revealed and the Jew resists energetically and offers his whole self. That is the nature of the Divine soul, of the “stiff necked people, Israel.”

Washington, January 22, 1987

Dear Rabbi,

I was delighted to accept the handsome menorah from you and your fellow rabbis when you came to the White House for the third consecutive year. Thank you very much for this spiritual gift – and for the copy of *Let There Be Light** which you also presented to me. I am particularly pleased to have these special remembrances in observance of Hanukkah – and your organization’s steadfast support and friendship mean more than I can say.

Please convey my kindest regards to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson. You and all the American Friends of Lubavitch have my best wishes.

Sincerely,
Ronald Reagan



A Lubavitch Children's Story: the Young Hasmonean

When little Yisrael returned from Heder (Hebrew school) on Hanukkah evening, the whole family were already ready to light the candles... "How much I desire to be one of the Hasmoneans, to join Judah the Maccabee in fighting the evil Greek Empire that tried to separate Israel from its Holy Torah", thought Yisrael. An inner desire to be one with the Hasmoneans took control of the young mind...

His sparkling eyes fastened on the candle that began to flicker and almost to go out. The flame rose and then fell again and again as if the candle were saying: I want to live, to light up the world... Yisrael's blue eyes closed for a moment and it seemed as if the candle was speaking to him before it departed and went out:

My dear son! I understand your desire to be a heroic Hasmonean, willing to sacrifice their lives for the Holy Torah... therefore I have come to assure you that you have the inner strength to be a Hasmonean. What the Maccabees did "in those days", you can do "in these days."

How? Let me tell you: Not far from your house are hundreds and thousands of Jews. Though inside them they have a holy Jewish soul like yours, it is hidden. They have no idea what a great and holy day Hanukkah is and what the candles symbolize – all those miracles. They know nothing.

Listen, my dear son! You have a wonderful opportunity to be a Maccabee, to fight the Greek spirit that distances them from the Hasmonean spirit. Go and talk to them. Tell them all the wondrous stories you have heard. Perhaps you can influence them so that they too will go with you to Heder (Hebrew school).

Before I leave you, (said the candle), I promise that if you really want it, you can be a Maccabee just like Judah the Maccabee...

"The impure were handed over to the pure, the evil to the righteous..."

By Rabbi Menachem Schneerson

The impure refer not to the Greeks as such, who as non-Jews have no basis for purity or impurity, but to the Hellenist Jews who have the potential to be pure... The miracle is even greater since the enemies of the Jews who were pure, righteous and students of Torah were the majority of Jews who willingly and by force became Hellenized. Yet the minority of Jews – pure, righteous students of Torah – defeated the many.

This is a source of encouragement for our generation in which the true and complete observers of Torah and mitzvot are a tiny minority among the Jews. Contemplating this fact can lead one, God forbid, to despair, since redemption requires all the Jews to repent. But the model of Hanukkah shows that a minority of Torah-true Jews can with God's help win over the majority who are like "children who were captured" by others and never learned about Judaism. The minority is small in quantity not in quality; because of their holiness they not only defeat the others but the others are "handed over" to the pure and become "pure, righteous, students of Torah". This battle of majority impure and minority pure Jews is repeated inside each Jew. The minority i.e. one's inner holiness and spirituality can transform the majority i.e. one's physicality. Thus we can be encouraged to repent and to build our own inner sanctum by purifying ourselves and then lighting within us our candle, for "*God's candle is the human soul.*"



E. Jewish Renewal's Hanukkah: Dark of the Sun, Dark of the Moon

By Arthur Waskow*

By the twenty-fifth of Kislev, we are ready to experience the moment of winter... By the twenty-fifth of every lunar month, **the moon has gone into exile**. The nights are dark, and getting darker. And late in Kislev, we are close to the moment of the winter solstice – when **the sun is also in exile**. The day is at its shortest and the night at its longest, before the sunlight begins to return. It is the darkest moment of the year, the moment when it is easiest to believe that the light will never return, the moment it is easiest to feel despair...

At this dark moment, we celebrate Hanukkah – the Feast of Dedication – by lighting candles for eight nights. Night after night, the candle-light increases. And night after night, we make our way into, through, and out of the darkness of the sun and moon. **We experience and feel the turn toward light from the moment of darkness, the turn toward salvation from the moment of despair...**

...The single bottle of oil symbolized the last irreducible minimum of spiritual light and creativity within the Jewish people – still there even in its worst moments of apathy and idolatry. The ability of that single jar of oil to stay lit for eight days symbolized how with God's help that tiny amount could unfold into an infinite supply of spiritual riches. Infinite, because the eighth day stood for infinity. Since the whole universe was created in seven days, **eight is a symbol of eternity and infinity...**

The Rabbis' Ambivalence about the Maccabees' Victory

But Jewish tradition about Hanukkah is not so simple. The books of the Maccabees themselves became an issue. They seem to have been treated as holy books by the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria. But the Rabbis [of Eretz Yisrael] never regarded them as holy, never entered them among the books that made up the Jewish Bible. And it was the Rabbis who determined what became Jewish Tradition. Ironically enough, these books that celebrated the Maccabees' victory over Hellenism survived not in Hebrew but only in the Greek language. Greek became one of the common tongues of the eastern Mediterranean as Hellenism grew stronger over the next few centuries. And it was the most Hellenized Jews [in Egypt] who most honored these [written] memorials of resistance to Hellenism.

For the classic Jewish view of the origins of Hanukkah, therefore, we must turn to the Talmud. Here we find Hanukkah in a most peculiar position. It is the only one of the traditional festivals that does not have a place in the *Mishnah* – the earlier level, or layer, of the Talmud. And in the later layer – the *Gemara* – it is treated in a very off-hand way, without the focused attention that is normal for deciding how to observe a holy day. The Rabbis are discussing what kinds of candles may be used for Shabbos when one of them asks, rather casually, whether the rules for Hanukkah candles are different. They explore this for a bit, talk about how the candles are to be lit, and then one of them says, as if he cannot quite remember, “What is Hanukkah?” They answer him:

Our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [begin] the eight days of Hanukkah, on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils in it, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed over them and defeated them, they searched and found only one bottle of oil sealed by the High Priest. It contained only enough for one day's lighting. Yet a miracle was brought about with it, and

* *Seasons of Our Joy* by Arthur Waskow, copyright 1982, reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston, pp. 87-101



they lit [with that oil] for eight days. The following year they were established as a festival, with *Hallel* and Thanksgiving. [Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b]

And at once the Rabbis go back to discussing the [Shabbat] candles. They have no more to say about the internal divisions of the Jews, the revolt against Antiochus, the victory of the Maccabees, or the rededication of the Temple. Why this cautious attitude toward Hanukkah?

The reason is that the Rabbis were not happy with the Maccabean approach to Jewish life. They were writing in the period when similar revolts against Rome, seeking to win the Jews political independence, to turn Judea into a rocky fortress, and to toughen the Jewish people had been systematically and brutally smashed by the iron fist of Rome. Only the rabbinical kind of power – the power not of rock but water, fluid and soft from moment to moment and yet irresistible over the long run – had survived. **Only the rabbinical kind of power had protected and preserved Jewish peoplehood...**

New Approaches: The Struggle Between the Light of Hope and the Darkness of Despair

...The Rabbinic tradition was hostile to the Maccabees, and modern Zionism, identifying with the Maccabees, was often hostile to the Rabbis. Thus Hanukkah has been a kind of battlefield between “**Rabbi**” and “**Maccabee**” as models of Jewish life. Is there any way to integrate these conflicting orientations to Hanukkah?

From the standpoint of the **Rabbi**, Hanukkah celebrated God’s saving Spirit: “**Not by might and not by power...**” To the Rabbi, this spiritual enlightenment required a kind of inwardness and contemplation that was contradictory to insurgent politics.

From the standpoint of the **Maccabee**, Hanukkah celebrated human courage and doggedness, the human ability to make history bend and change. The need to organize, to act, to fight, to build might and use power, seemed in the aspect of the Maccabee to contradict study, prayer, and contemplation.

Can a new generation of Jews help to resolve this contradiction? If our forebears repressed and ignored the sense of Hanukkah as a festival of the darkened moon and darkened sun, what could we contribute by opening up to that aspect of the festival? What could we add by seeing Hanukkah as part of the nature cycles of the year and month?

Seen this way, Hanukkah is the moment when light is born from darkness, hope from despair. Both the Maccabean and Rabbinic models fall into place. The Maccabean revolt came at the darkest moment of Jewish history – when not only was a foreign king imposing idolatry, but large numbers of Jews were choosing to obey. The miracle at the Temple came at a moment of spiritual darkness – when even military victory had proven useless because the temple could not be rededicated in the absence of the sacred oil. At the moment of utter darkness in Modiin, Mattathias struck the spark of rebellion – and fanned it into flame. At the moment of utter darkness at the Temple, when it would have been rational to wait for more oil to be pressed and consecrated, the Jews ignored all reasonable reasons, and lit the little oil they had...

The real conflict is not between the Rabbi and the Maccabee, between spiritual and political, but between apathy and hope, between a blind surrendering to darkness and an acting to light up new pathways. Sometimes the arena will be in outward action, sometimes in inward meditation. But always the question is whether to recognize the darkness – and transcend it.

The necessity of recognizing the moment of darkness is what we learn from seeing Hanukkah in its context of the sun and moon. There is no use pretending that the sun is always bright; there is no use pretending that the moon is always full. **It is only by recognizing the season of darkness that**



we know it is time to light the candles, to sow a seed of light that can sprout and spring forth later in the year.

F. The Pluralist Manifesto of Hanukkah and its Mission
Rav Abraham HaKohen Kook

Everyone must know and understand
that within burns a candle/lamp.
There is no one's candle is like his/her fellow's
and no one lacks their own candle.

Everyone must know and understand
that it is their task to work to reveal the light of that candle in the public realm.
And to ignite it until it is a great flame,
and to illuminate the whole world

* *When a Jew Celebrates* by Harry Gersh with Eugene Borowitz and Hyman Chanover, published by Behrman House 1971, (pp. 171-181), and reprinted by permission.

* Based on *Sichot HaRebbe* (Talks) from the years 5701, 5700, 5722.

* R. Zamir, *Hagei Yisrael for Youth*, Center for Education, 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, 1984 pp. 315-323.

