

# House of Sages

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HANNUKAH

14TH DECEMBER, 2025

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## COME & LEARN

*There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*

*Albert Einstein*



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## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- When you think about Hannukah, what is the story you grew up with?
- What is the meaning of the narrative(s) you know?
- These texts follow themes of miracle, war, power, myth, and identity. As you read, ask yourself: which version of Hanukkah is each text trying to sell you, and what does that reveal about the world it was written for?

## SOURCE 1 – TALMUD SHABBAT 21B

*5th–6th century, Babylonia*

What is Hanukkah, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Sages taught in Megillat Ta'anit: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils by touching them. When the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil sealed by the High Priest, enough for one day. A miracle occurred and it lasted eight days. The next year the Sages instituted these days and made them holidays with recitation of Hallel and thanksgiving.

מהי חג חנוכה וכי מה דליקי עליה בה? חכמים אמרו במגילת תענית: כב' בכסלו שמונת ימי חנוכה הם, ואין מתאבלים ואין מתענין בהן. מכהן יוונים באו אל הקדש וטמאו את כל השמנים שהיו בה בנגעיהם. וכשניצח בית חשמונאי ונשלט עליהם וחיפשו ומצאו דל אשה אחת שם סתומה בטבעת הכהן הגדול לא נגעו בה היו שם שמנים להספיק להדליק כלי המנורה יום אחד, ונעשה בה נס והדליקו ממנה שמונה ימים, ושנה הבאה קבעום ועשו ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

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## SOURCE 2 – MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, SCROLL OF ESTHER AND HANUKKAH 3

*Between 1170 and 1180 CE, Egypt*

In [the era of] the Second Temple, the Greek kingdom issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments. They extended their hands against their property and their daughters; they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc within, and made the sacraments impure.

The Jews suffered great difficulties from them, for they oppressed them greatly until the God of our ancestors had mercy upon them, delivered them from their hand, and saved them. The sons of the Hasmoneans, the High Priests, overcame [them], slew them, and saved the Jews from their hand. They appointed a king from the priests, and sovereignty returned to Israel for more than 200 years, until the destruction of the Second Temple.

When the Jews overcame their enemies and destroyed them, they entered the Sanctuary; this was on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. They could not find any pure oil in the Sanctuary, with the exception of a single cruse. It contained enough oil to burn for merely one day. They lit the arrangement of candles from it for eight days until they could crush olives and produce pure oil.

בְּבֵית שְׁנֵי כְּשִׁמְלָכִי יוֹן גָּזְרוּ גְזֵרוֹת עַל  
יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִטְלוּ דָתָם וְלֹא הִנִּיחוּ אוֹתָם  
לְעֶסֶק בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת. וּפָשְׁטוּ יָדָם  
בְּמִמוֹנָם וּבְבָנוֹתֵיהֶם וּנְכַנְסוּ לְהִיכַל  
וּפָרְצוּ בוֹ פְּרֻצוֹת וְטָמְאוּ הַטְּהָרוֹת.  
וְצָר לָהֶם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מְאֹד מִפְּנֵיהֶם  
וּלְחֻצוֹם לַחֵץ גָּדוֹל עַד שֶׁרַחַם עֲלֵיהֶם  
אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְהוֹשִׁיעַם מִיָּדָם  
וְהִצִּילֵם וּגְבְּרוּ בְּנֵי חֲשִׁמוֹנָי הַכֹּהֲנִים  
הַגְּדוֹלִים וְהִרְגוּם וְהוֹשִׁיעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל  
מִיָּדָם וְהֶעֱמִידוּ מֶלֶךְ מִן הַכֹּהֲנִים  
וְחִזְרָה מַלְכוּת לְיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵתֵר עַל  
מֵאֵתִים שָׁנָה עַד הַחֲרָבָן הַשְּׁנִי:  
וּכְשֶׁגָּבְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אוֹיְבֵיהֶם  
וְאֲבָדוּם בְּכ"ה בְּחֹדֶשׁ כֶּסֶלּוֹ הָיָה  
וּנְכַנְסוּ לְהִיכַל וְלֹא מָצְאוּ שֶׁמֶן טְהוֹר  
בְּמִקְדָּשׁ אֲלָא פֶּךָ אֶחָד וְלֹא הָיָה בוֹ  
לְהַדְלִיק אֲלָא יוֹם אֶחָד בְּלִבָּד  
וְהַדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נְרוֹת הַמַּעֲרָכָה  
שְׁמוֹנֶה יָמִים עַד שֶׁכָּתְשׁוּ זֵיתִים  
וְהוֹצִיאוּ שֶׁמֶן טְהוֹר:

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## **SOURCE 3 – JUDAH LEON MAGNES**

*1877-1948, Jerusalem*

Just as Hanukkah candles are lighted one by one from a single flame, so the tale of the miracle is passed from one man to another, from one house to another, and to the whole House of Israel throughout the generations

## **SOURCE 4 – JONATHAN D. SARNA, MODERN AMERICAN HANNUKAH**

*C. 2010, United States of America*

Hanukkah, which means “dedication,” is the festival that commemorates the purification and rededication of the Temple following the Greek occupation of that holy place. Today, the holiday reminds Jews to rededicate themselves to keeping alive the flame of Jewish religion, culture, and peoplehood so that it may be passed on to the next generation.

## **SOURCE 5 – JONATHAN SACKS, CHANUKAH – CANDLE 2**

*1948-2020, England*

After the destruction of the Second Beit Hamikdash, many Rabbis were convinced that the festival of Chanukah should be abolished. After all, it celebrated the rededication of the Beit Hamikdash. And the Beit Hamikdash was no more. It had been destroyed by the Romans under Titus. Without a Beit Hamikdash, what was there left to celebrate?

The Talmud tells us that in at least one town, Lod, Chanukah was abolished. Yet eventually the other view prevailed, which is why we continue to celebrate Chanukah to this day.

Why? Because although the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, Jewish hope was not destroyed. We may have lost the building but we still have the story, and the memory, and the light. And what had happened once in the days of the Maccabees could happen again. And it was those words, *od lo avdah tikvatenu*, “our hope is not destroyed,” words that became part of the song, *Hatikvah*, that inspired Jews to return to Israel and rebuild their ancient state.

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## SOURCE 3 – ALLISON LEE POIRIER, THE TRUTH(S) ABOUT HANUKKAH

*2024, United States of America*

Hanukkah should be viewed not as a single historical narrative but as a layered mythological tapestry woven with theological and ethical lessons. While acknowledging the historical Maccabees' role as freedom fighters, the complex violence they enacted and the miraculous oil story invites deeper reflection. The real 'truth' lies in Hanukkah's enduring lessons about hope, resilience, identity, and spiritual courage in the face of cultural and religious challenges. This view embraces the rabbinic narrative ambiguity as fertile ground for a rich mythopoetic tradition that continues to inspire diverse Jewish communities.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Of the themes highlighted in these texts (miracle, war, power, myth, and identity) which feels most compelling to you? Which is most challenging?
- How do you think the moment in time you are exposing yourself to these sources impacts your perspective?
- What perspective might you want to add to these texts if any?

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