



חַנּוּכָּה

HANUKÁ

eight nights, eight lights — a Spiritual Humanistic home service

Martin Hasan Di Maggio · Humanistic Judaism UK · the Spinoza Havurah

Hanuká — eight nights, eight lights. A Spiritual Humanistic home service for the festival.

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— Introduction

Hanukkah may have its roots in winter celebrations kept in ancient Mesopotamian cultures. Those festivities marked the solstice, and the return of daylight at the time of year when people most feared the sun was failing. Households lit eight flames on eight consecutive nights, adding or taking away one each night: kindling fire as a way of imitating the cycles of the earth, in the belief that it might persuade the light to come back. Light stood for life and darkness for death, and the festival carried an optimism because of it.

Rabbinic tradition later gave the Maccabees a divine significance: the story that the oil for the Temple lamp lasted eight days when it should have lasted one. In Humanistic Judaism the keeping of Hanukkah reaches past the historical accounts, and rests instead on a choice — to live courageously, with creativity and with hope. Each candle stands for a human quality that can be cultivated.

The lamp goes in a window or a doorway, to publicise the “miracle” of Jewish survival against the odds. We light, we bless, and we take the evening to think about the quality the night is named for.





הִנֵּה מַה-טּוֹב וּמַה-נָּעִים

שָׁבֶת עַמִּים גַּם-יַחַד

*Hiné ma-tov umá-na'im,
shévet amím gam-yáhad.*

Behold how good and how pleasant it is
for people to dwell together.

*The shamash is lit first, and from it every other light. It is the candle that gives its flame away
and is not diminished.*

בְּרוּךְ הָאוֹר בַּמְסוֹרֶת
הַנּוֹתֵן לָנוּ שִׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה
בְּהַדְלָקַת נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה

*Barúch ha'ór bamasóret
hanóten lánú sasón vesimhá
behadlákat ner shel hanuká.*

Blessed is the light in the tradition
which gives us joy and happiness
in the kindling of the Hanukkah candles.

On the first night, and whenever the season is felt as new.

נְבָרֵךְ אֶת הַכֹּחַ בְּתוֹכֵנוּ

שֶׁהֶחַיֵּנוּ וְקִיָּמֵנוּ

וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה

*Nevaréch et hakóah betochénu,
sheheḥeyánu vekiyemánu
vehigi'ánu lazmán hazé.*

Let us bless the strength within us
that has enlivened us, sustained us,
and brought us to this season.



THE FIRST NIGHT

ברוך אור התבונה

Barúch or batvuná

Blessed is the light of reason

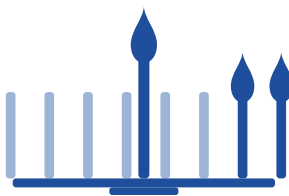
The story is usually told as a victory of the few over the many. But before any of that, someone had to look at what was being done and judge it wrong — not by instinct, but by thinking it through.

Tvuná is not cleverness. Its root is the root of discernment: the capacity to tell one thing from another. A lamp is the oldest picture we have of it. Light does not tell you what to do. It shows you what is there and leaves the deciding to you.

Tonight there is one flame, and it is enough to see by.

AROUND THE TABLE

What did you change your mind about this year, and what changed it — evidence, or someone you trusted? Which of the two do you find harder to argue with?



THE SECOND NIGHT

ברוך אור התבונה וברוך אור הכבוד עצמי

Barúch or hatvuná, uvarúch or hakavód atsmí

Blessed is the light of reason, and blessed is the light of self-esteem

Kavód is weight: dignity rather than vanity. To bless the light of self-esteem is to say that the worth of a person is not handed down from above, and cannot be withdrawn by a majority.

Those who refused to eat at the king's table were not claiming to be better than anyone. They were refusing to become someone else on demand.

There is a kind of self-regard that is only pride, and it makes people brittle. The kind worth blessing is quieter: knowing what you will not trade, and being able to say so without contempt for whoever is asking.

AROUND THE TABLE

Where have you gone along with something to avoid being difficult? What would it have cost to say no — and was that cost real, or imagined?



THE THIRD NIGHT

בָּרוּךְ אֹרֶת הַתְּבוּנָה בָּרוּךְ אֹרֶת הַכְּבוֹד עֲצָמִי וּבָרוּךְ אֹרֶת הָאִמָּץ

Barúch or hatvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, uvarúch or ha'ómets

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, and blessed is the light of courage

Courage is not fearlessness. *Ómets* is strength summoned: the effort of doing the thing anyway.

The festival remembers fighters, and it is worth saying plainly that they were fighters. This was a war, and a civil war at that — Jew against Jew as much as Jew against empire. We do not have to admire everything the Maccabees did in order to notice that they did not simply wait.

Most courage is not military. It is the duller kind: staying when leaving would be easier, speaking first in a room that has agreed to say nothing.

AROUND THE TABLE

Think of a time you were the first to speak. What made it possible? Now think of a time you were not. What would you have needed?



THE FOURTH NIGHT

בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַתְּבוּנָה בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַכְּבוֹד עֲצָמֵי בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הָאֱמֶץ וּבָרוּךְ
אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַחֵרֶת

*Barúch or hatvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, barúch or ha'ómets, uvarúch or
haḥerút*

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, blessed is the light
of courage, and blessed is the light of freedom

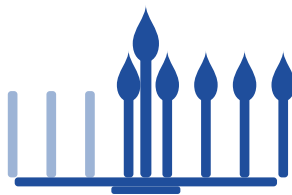
Ḥerút is not being left alone. In Jewish usage the word always carries the memory of
coming out of something.

The rededication was not the end of the story but the start of the harder part. Having
won the right to decide, they then had to decide. Freedom is the moment the constraint
lifts and the responsibility arrives.

A people can be free and still frightened; free and still cruel. The question a free person
faces is not what they are permitted to do, but what they will now choose.

AROUND THE TABLE

*Name one freedom you have that your grandparents did not. What have you
done with it? And is there one you would find hard to justify to them?*



THE FIFTH NIGHT

ברוך אור התבונה ברוך אור הכבוד עצמי ברוך אור האמץ ברוך
אור החרות וברוך אור האהבה

*Barúch or batvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, barúch or ha'ómets, barúch or
haḥerút, uvarúch or ha'ahavá*

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, blessed is the light
of courage, blessed is the light of freedom, and blessed is the light of love

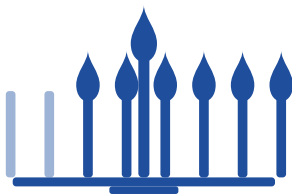
The lamp goes in the window. That is the whole of it: light meant to be seen from
outside.

Love here is not sentiment but attention — the decision to keep noticing particular
people, which is harder than caring about people in general. It is easy to love humanity
and difficult to be patient with your own family on the fifth night of a festival.

Ahavá in this reading is the love that survives knowing someone well, which is the only
kind that has been tested.

AROUND THE TABLE

*Who at this table knows you best? Tell them one thing you have never said aloud
about what that means to you. If that is too much tonight, name someone who is
not here and should be.*



THE SIXTH NIGHT

בְּרוּךְ אֹר הַתְּבוּנָה בְּרוּךְ אֹר הַכְּבוֹד עֲצֻמִּי בְּרוּךְ אֹר הָאֱמָץ בְּרוּךְ
אֹר הַחֲרוּת בְּרוּךְ אֹר הָאֱהָבָה וּבְרוּךְ אֹר הַנֶּאֱמָנוּת

*Barúch or hatvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, barúch or ha'ómets, barúch or
ha'herút, barúch or ha'ahavá, uvarúch or hane'emanút*

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, blessed is the light
of courage, blessed is the light of freedom, blessed is the light of love, and blessed
is the light of loyalty

Ne'emanút shares a root with *amen*: to be steady, to be relied upon. It is the least
glamorous of the eight and probably the most load-bearing.

Loyalty has a dark side, and this festival shows it. Loyalty to a group can become a licence
to treat those outside it as less.

The loyalty worth blessing is the kind that binds you to people without blinding you to
them — that lets you stay and argue rather than leave, or agree.

AROUND THE TABLE

*What are you loyal to that you would still be loyal to if it were unpopular? And is
there a loyalty you keep out of habit rather than conviction?*



THE SEVENTH NIGHT

בָּרוּךְ אֹר הַתְּבוּנָה בָּרוּךְ אֹר הַכְּבוֹד עֲצָמִי בָּרוּךְ אֹר הָאֱמֶץ בָּרוּךְ
אֹר הַחַרּוּת בָּרוּךְ אֹר הָאֱהָבָה בָּרוּךְ אֹר הַנְּאֻמָּנוּת וּבָרוּךְ אֹר
הַנְּדִיבוּת

*Barúch or hatvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, barúch or ha'ómets, barúch or
haḥerút, barúch or ha'ahavá, barúch or hane'emanút, uvarúch or hanedivút*

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, blessed is the light
of courage, blessed is the light of freedom, blessed is the light of love, blessed is
the light of loyalty, and blessed is the light of generosity

A *nadiv* gives freely: unasked, and owing nothing.

The Temple was rededicated with what people brought. Generosity here is not only
money. It is the giving of time, of credit, of the benefit of the doubt.

The measure is not the size of the gift but whether it costs the giver anything — and
whether it leaves the dignity of the one receiving it intact. The best gifts need not be
repaid, or even remembered.

AROUND THE TABLE

*What did someone give you this year that they will never know mattered? What
could you give this week that nobody would find out about?*



THE EIGHTH NIGHT

ברוך אור התבונה ברוך אור הכבוד עצמי ברוך אור האמץ ברוך
אור החרות ברוך אור האהבה ברוך אור הנאמנות ברוך אור
הנדיבות וברוך אור התקנה

*Barúch or hatvuná, barúch or hakavód atsmí, barúch or ha'ómets, barúch or
haheirut, barúch or ha'ahavá, barúch or hane'emanút, barúch or hanedivút,
uvarúch or hatikvá*

Blessed is the light of reason, blessed is the light of self-esteem, blessed is the light
of courage, blessed is the light of freedom, blessed is the light of love, blessed is
the light of loyalty, blessed is the light of generosity, and blessed is the light of
hope

Tikvá comes from a root meaning a cord: a thread, something to hold on to.

The eighth night is the brightest because the lamp has been built up night by night, and
that is the argument. Hope here is not optimism, which is a prediction, but a practice: the
decision to act as though what we do will matter, without proof that it will.

The festival ends at its brightest, and then the lights go out and the year carries on. That is
the point. The light was never in the oil.

AROUND THE TABLE

*What are you working towards that you may not see finished? Who will carry it
on — and what would you want them to know about why you began?*

A ḥanukiyá is not a menorá. The menorá of the Temple had seven branches; a ḥanukiyá has nine — eight in a row, all at the same height, and a ninth set apart from them, raised, dropped or pushed forward. That ninth is the *shamash*, the servant. It is the working candle, and it is the only one you are meant to use.

THE ORDER

Put the candles in from the right. On the first night one candle stands at the far right. On the second a candle joins it on its left, and so on, so that the row fills leftward across the eight nights.

Light them from the left. The newest candle — the one you have just added — is lit first, and you work back towards the right. Filling one way and lighting the other means the night you have reached is always the first flame you touch.

The shamash goes first and gives the light. Light it, say the blessing, and use it to light the others; then set it back in its own place, still burning. The lights of the ḥanukiyá are for looking at, not for reading or working by, which is the whole reason the shamash exists.

WHEN, AND WHERE

Light after dark, and while there are people to see it. On Friday the ḥanukiyá is lit *before* the Shabbat candles, since nothing is kindled once Shabbat has begun; on Saturday night it is lit after Shabbat has gone out.

Let the lights burn at least half an hour. Put the ḥanukiyá in a window or near a doorway, where it can be seen from the street — the light is meant to be public. And do not leave it burning in an empty room.



— How many candles



More than people expect. Each night needs its own candles plus a shamash, and none of them can be used again.



NIGHT	LIGHTS	SHAMASH	CANDLES
First	1	1	2
Second	2	1	3
Third	3	1	4
Fourth	4	1	5
Fifth	5	1	6
Sixth	6	1	7
Seventh	7	1	8
Eighth	8	1	9
Whole festival	36	8	44



Forty-four for one ḥanukiyá, which is why a standard box holds exactly that. If more than one person in the house lights, count a box each — and buy the second box before the fifth night, when the shops run out.



— Wax or oil

Both are ordinary. The choice is between convenience and the older practice, and neither is more correct than the other.

WAX

The thin coloured tapers sold in boxes of forty-four. They push into the cups, need nothing preparing, and burn for around half an hour to forty-five minutes — long enough, and no longer.

Check they fit before the first night: cheap candles vary, and a candle that is loose will lean and gutter. Foil in the cup makes the wax easier to clear the next evening.

Whichever you use, the *hanukiyá* gets hot and stays hot. Keep it clear of curtains, off a windowsill that a draught crosses, and out of reach of anyone small enough to want to touch it.

OIL

The older way, and closer to the story the festival tells. Olive oil in small glass cups with floating wicks, or ready-filled cups you drop in and throw away.

The flame is steadier and lasts longer, and you can choose how long by how much you pour. It wants a *hanukiyá* built for cups — many are convertible — and it is messier: oil creeps, and glass gets hot.





— The dreidel סביבון

Four Hebrew letters, one on each face. Outside Israel they are נגהש, and they are usually read as *Nes gadól hayá sham* — a great miracle happened there.

That reading came second. The game is older than its explanation: a European gambling top whose four sides told you what to do — *nichts, ganz, halb, stell ein*; nothing, all, half, put in. The letters were the rules first. Somebody later noticed they could be made to spell something worth saying, and the top became a lesson.

Which means the door is open. We read them this way:

הָבָה נַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם גָּדוֹל

Hava na'asé shalom gadól

Come, let us make great peace.

On an Israeli dreidel the fourth letter is פ, for po, here. Then the sentence runs Hava na'asé gedolót po — come, let us do great things here.

— How the game is played

Everyone needs a pile of the same thing to play with: nuts, raisins, matchsticks, chocolate coins. Ten or fifteen each. Nothing that matters.

Each player puts one in the middle to start the pot, and whenever the pot is empty everyone puts one in again. Then take turns to spin.

LETTERWORD	WHAT YOU DO
נ Na'asé — let us make	Nothing. Pass the dreidel on.
ג Gadól — great	Take the whole pot. Everyone puts one in again.
ה Hava — come	Take half the pot, rounding up.
ש Shalóm — peace	Put one in.

If you run out, you are not out of the game: ask, and someone lends you one. Play until the candles have burnt down, and then stop, whoever is ahead.



— Shalom Gadól — a second game

Because the four letters spell a sentence, they can be played *in order*. Nothing is won or lost here; the object is to say the whole thing.

THE RULES

Everyone starts at the beginning of the sentence, needing ך.

Spin in turn. If you spin the letter you need next, you have it: say the word aloud and move on to the next one. If you spin anything else, nothing happens and the dreidel passes.

The order is ך • ן • ך • ן — *Hava, na'ase, shalom, gadol*.

The first to reach the end says the sentence whole, and the table says it back.

THE RULE THAT MAKES IT A PEACE GAME

A spin you cannot use is not wasted. Look to the player on your right: if it is the letter *they* need, you may give it to them.

Nobody can finish quickly on their own, and everybody can be finished by somebody else. That is the whole joke of the game, and it is worth letting the table work it out rather than explaining it.

PLAYING AS ONE TABLE

Or drop the competing altogether: pass the dreidel round and build a single sentence together, and see whether the table can say it before the shamash burns down.

Sung once the lights are burning.

הנרות הללו אָנוּ מַדְלִיקִין
עַל הַמַּעֲשִׂים הַנִּפְלְאִים
וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַצְדָּקוֹת
שֶׁעָשׂוּ הוֹרֵינוּ
בְּיָמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנֵנוּ

*Hanerót halálu ánu madlikín,
al hama'asím hanifla'im,
ve'al hateshu'ót ve'al hatsedakót
she'asú horénu,
bayamím habém bazmán hazé.*

These lights we kindle
for the wondrous deeds,
for the liberations and the acts of justice
our ancestors brought about,
in days of old and in our own time.

words by Martin H. Di Maggio





— Frying

The food of Hanukkah is fried, and that is the whole of the reasoning: oil in the pan standing for oil in the lamp. What gets fried depends on where a family came from. Ashkenazi households fry potatoes; North African and Sephardi households fry *sfenj*, which is older; Israeli bakeries fry doughnuts by the ton. The Jews of Italy, who are neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi and have been in Rome since before the Empire, took the logic further than anyone and fried the whole meal.

Five recipes follow, the savoury first. All of them want the oil properly hot — 170–180°C — and none of them wants a crowded pan. Have a slotted spoon, a tray lined with kitchen paper, and someone to talk to.

— Latkes לְכִיבּוֹת

Makes about twenty · forty minutes

YOU NEED

1kg floury potatoes — Maris Piper or King Edward
1 medium onion
2 eggs, beaten
3–4 tbs plain flour or matzá meal
1 tsp fine salt · black pepper
Sunflower oil for frying

TO SERVE

Apple sauce, or soured cream, or both

Peel and coarsely grate the potatoes and the onion together — the onion keeps the potato from browning. Pile into a clean tea towel and wring it out hard over a bowl.

Let the liquid stand two minutes. Pour it away: the white starch left in the bottom of the bowl goes back into the potato. That is what holds a latke together.

Mix in the eggs, flour, salt and plenty of pepper. Work quickly; the mixture greys if it stands.

Pour oil 5mm deep and get it properly hot. Drop in heaped spoonfuls and flatten them. Three or four minutes a side, until the edges are dark and lacy. Drain, salt at once, and keep the first batch warm in the oven while you argue about whether apple sauce or soured cream is correct.



— Melanzane alla giudia

Serves six alongside everything else · best made a day ahead

YOU NEED

2 medium aubergines

Fine salt

Olive oil for frying — a generous amount

2 cloves garlic, sliced thin

A good handful of basil, or mint, or both

2 tbsp red wine vinegar

Black pepper

NOTE

Jewish Rome is generally credited with bringing the aubergine into Italian cooking, and with the fried vegetables that spread far beyond the ghetto.

Slice the aubergines lengthways about 5mm thick. Layer them in a colander with salt between the layers and leave for an hour, weighted with a plate. They will give up a surprising amount of brown liquid.

Rinse briefly, then dry each slice properly between cloths. Wet aubergine will not brown; it will simply drink the oil.

Get a shallow layer of olive oil hot. Fry the slices a few at a time until deep gold on both sides, and lift them onto paper.

Layer them on a dish while still warm, scattering garlic, torn herbs, pepper and a little vinegar between the layers. Cover and leave at least an hour — overnight is better.

Serve at room temperature, never hot. It improves for two days.

— Sufganiyót ספגניות

Makes about twenty · two hours, most of it waiting

FOR THE DOUGH

500g strong white flour
7g fast-action dried yeast
60g caster sugar
1 tsp fine salt
2 eggs
250ml warm milk
60g soft butter
1 tsp vanilla · zest of half a lemon

TO FINISH

1.5 litres sunflower oil
About 300g jam — strawberry or apricot
Icing sugar

Mix flour, yeast, sugar and salt. Add eggs, milk, vanilla and zest and bring to a rough dough, then work the butter in a piece at a time. Knead ten minutes, until smooth and slightly tacky.

Cover and leave until doubled, an hour to an hour and a half.

Roll to 1cm and cut 6cm rounds. Set them apart on floured paper, cover, and let them rise again for forty minutes until puffed.

Heat the oil to 170°C. Fry three or four at a time, two minutes a side, until deep gold with a pale band round the middle. Drain.

While still warm, make a hole in the side with a skewer and pipe the jam in until they feel heavy. Dust thickly with icing sugar.



— Sfenj ספֿנֿג



Makes about fifteen · the dough is meant to be wet



FOR THE DOUGH

500g plain flour
7g fast-action dried yeast
1 tsp sugar
1½ tsp fine salt
350–380ml warm water



TO FINISH

1 litre sunflower or light olive oil
Caster sugar, or honey warmed with a little water



Stir the yeast and sugar into the warm water and leave five minutes. Mix into the flour and salt. The dough should be far too wet to knead — that is right. Do not add flour to correct it.

Instead, wet a hand, reach under the dough, stretch it up and fold it over. Turn the bowl and repeat four times. Do that three times at ten minute intervals, then leave to rise until doubled and full of bubbles, an hour and a half.



Heat the oil to 180°C. Wet both hands. Pull off a lump the size of a plum, pierce the middle with a thumb and open it into a ring, then lower it into the oil.



Fry two or three minutes, turning once, until deep gold and hollow. Drain, and eat within the hour — sfenj does not keep. Roll in sugar, or dip in warm honey.



— Precipizi

Makes a large plateful · the easiest of the five to make with children

FOR THE DOUGH

300g plain flour

3 eggs

2 tbsp caster sugar

2 tbsp olive or sunflower oil

1 tsp anise seed, lightly crushed

Pinch of fine salt · zest of an orange

TO FINISH

1 litre sunflower oil

250g runny honey

60g raisins, soaked in warm water

Toasted pine nuts, if you like

Work everything into a firm, smooth dough
— softer than pasta, stiffer than bread.

Wrap and rest half an hour.

Roll into ropes the thickness of a finger and
cut them across into pieces the size of a
thumbnail, on the diagonal so they come
out as little diamonds. This is the part to
hand over.

Heat the oil to 175°C. Fry them a handful at
a time; they puff and turn pale gold in
under a minute. Drain well.

Warm the honey with a tablespoon of water
until it runs freely. Take it off the heat, tip
in the fried pieces and the drained raisins,
and turn everything over until every one is
coated.

Pile onto a wetted plate — wet, or it welds
itself on — scatter the pine nuts, and leave
to set. Eaten with fingers, from the middle
of the table.





— Sources

Everything here is by Martin Hasan Di Maggio, apart from the traditional texts named below.

Hiné ma tov is Psalm 133:1, with *ahím*, brothers, opened out to *amím*, peoples. The English is made from the Hebrew in front of it.