

GATEWAY TO JUDAISM

THE WHAT, HOW, AND WHY OF JEWISH LIFE

By: Rabbi Mordechai Becher

From the Publisher:

Thank you for downloading this digital sampler of *Gateway to Judaism: The What, How, and Why of Jewish Life*, by Rabbi Mordechai Becher. We are providing it to you as a “taste” of an extraordinarily helpful new book that meets a critical need in Jewish living and learning today.

Rabbi Becher is an expert in helping Jews reconnect with their rich heritage. As a senior lecturer with the popular Gateways Seminars, he’s inspired thousands of students to find their way home to a dynamic, spiritual, vibrant, and meaningful connection to Torah, to community, and to the values and commitments so essential to our past and future existence. He wrote this book because he perceived the need for a fresh, one-volume synthesis of Jewish thought, law, tradition, and lifestyle. While the author’s style is refreshingly readable, his intent is to provide a serious insider look at traditional Judaism in a contemporary setting.

The Table of Contents offers you a sweeping overview of the scope of the book. Beyond the elements that can be quantified in the what and how of Jewish living, Rabbi Becher provides a well-documented trail of insights leading the reader to understand why we do what we do. Of the twenty-five chapters, you’ll note that ten of them deal with Jewish holidays exclusively, including the weekly experience of Shabbat, our day of communal rest and spiritual renewal. The two sample chapters, on Chanukah and Purim respectively, will give you a sense of how Rabbi Becher develops the book’s subject matter.

Whether you are new to Jewish learning or a seasoned maven, we hope that you will find this sampler inspiring and motivating. We believe *Gateway to Judaism* can be your portal to a dimension of Jewish experience that will bring joy and meaning to your life, as you cope with the challenges of modern-day living.

Enjoy!

From the publishers and staff of Shaar Press, a division of ArtScroll Mesorah Publications

Praise for “Gateway to Judaism”

“Gateway to Judaism is a book that will inspire, inform and guide readers in exploring their Jewish heritage. The style is user-friendly and the profound philosophical and ethical teachings of Judaism are clearly presented in an up-to-date, relevant manner. To the question ‘What is Judaism all about?’ this book provides a thoroughly researched, comprehensive and very accessible response.”

JOE LIEBERMAN

U.S. Senator

“In today’s challenging world, Jews must understand the how’s and why’s of our identity. This book gives cogent answers. I recommend it highly.”

NATAN SHARANSKY

*Former Israeli Member of Knesset and Minister
Author of Fear No Evil and The Case for Democracy*

“Gateway to Judaism is a remarkably thorough and meaningful guide to the Jewish calendar, life cycle and faith. This volume will provide renewed excitement and significance to observances throughout the year.”

MALCOLM HOENLEIN

*Executive Vice Chairman,
Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations*

“This is what we’ve been waiting for! Rabbi Becher’s masterpiece is thoroughly engaging and comprehensive in scope. His presentation and advocacy of a vibrant and pertinent Judaism will capture your imagination and enhance commitment to the Jewish way of life.”

DR. FLORENCE NEUMANN

Bronfman Center for Jewish Life, 92nd Street Y, New York

“This is a book that I would not hesitate to give to anyone in the U.S. Army as an insightful, inspiring and entertaining guide to Judaism.”

COLONEL IRA KRONENBERG

Chaplain, U.S. Army Reserve

Table of Contents

Introduction	9
--------------	---

TIME

THE CYCLE OF LIFE

1. Two Become One	15
<i>Dating, the wedding ceremony, marriage and divorce</i>	
<i>Supplemental Material:</i>	
<i>The Seven Blessings</i>	
<i>The Ketubah</i>	
2. Zero to Thirteen	37
<i>Birth, naming, circumcision, Pidyon Haben, Bar and Bat Mitzvah</i>	
3. A Time to Cry	59
<i>Death, burial, mourning, life after death, Kaddish</i>	

CALENDAR

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 4. The Jewish Calendar | 81 |
| <i>The lunar calendar: history, philosophy and structure</i> | |
| <i>Supplemental Material:</i> | |
| <i>Table of the Months and Events of the Jewish Year</i> | |
| 5. Who Invented the Weekend Anyway? | 95 |
| <i>The meaning and practice of Shabbat</i> | |
| <i>Supplemental Material:</i> | |
| <i>The Categories of Prohibited Shabbat Work</i> | |
| <i>Kiddush for Shabbat</i> | |
| 6. The Jewish New Year | 115 |
| <i>Rosh Hashanah, shofar and Divine judgment</i> | |
| 7. The Day of Atonement | 131 |
| <i>Yom Kippur, fasting and forgiveness</i> | |
| 8. Jews in Booths — Sukkot | 145 |
| <i>The sukkah, lulav and etrog,</i> | |
| <i>Intermediate Days, Simchat Torah</i> | |
| 9. Spiritual Survival: Chanukah | 165 |
| <i>The history and meaning of Chanukah,</i> | |
| <i>the menorah, latkes and dreidels</i> | |
| 10. Physical Survival: Purim | 177 |
| <i>The history and meaning of Purim,</i> | |
| <i>the Scroll of Esther, celebration</i> | |
| 11. Passover — Free at Last | 189 |
| <i>Exodus, Passover Seder, matzah</i> | |
| 12. Back to Sinai: Shavuot | 217 |
| <i>Revelation at Mt. Sinai and celebration of the Torah</i> | |
| 13. Slow Down, It's a Fast Day! | 233 |
| <i>The history and purpose of the Jewish fast days</i> | |

PLACE

14. The Torah and Its Home 247
The Torah Scroll; history, purpose and appearance of the synagogue
15. The Land of Israel 259
The Jewish national homeland — historical, spiritual and legal significance

SELF

ACTION

16. Looking Jewish 281
Modest clothing, head coverings, beards, tattoos
17. Soul Food: The Kosher Dietary Laws 293
The practice and purpose of keeping kosher
18. Material Witnesses 313
Physical symbols of Jewish life: mezuzah, tefillin, tzitzit, tallit
19. Person to Person 335
Behavior toward other people: love, money, honesty and ethics
20. Justice, Charity and Tzedakah 355
Jewish ideals and practice of philanthropy and kindness

THOUGHT

21. Belief, Knowledge and Faith 371
The Thirteen Principles of Faith

22. Why Are There Commandments?	393
<i>What are mitzvot and why do we do them?</i>	

23. Torah Study	409
<i>What, when, where and why</i>	
<i>Supplemental Material:</i>	
<i>The Talmudic Method</i>	

SPEECH

24. Getting Up on the Right Side of Bed: Prayer	427
<i>The philosophy, history and meaning of prayers</i>	

25. Blessings and Appreciation	451
<i>Laws and significance of blessings</i>	

Appendices

I. Who Are the Jews, and Where Do They Come From?	465
<i>A brief Jewish family history</i>	

II. The Books of the People, for the People of the Book	475
<i>A basic outline of key works in Jewish tradition</i>	

III. Recommended Reading	487
--------------------------	-----

IV. Where Do I Go From Here?	497
<i>An insider's list of websites and contact information</i>	

Glossary	503
----------	-----

Index	513
-------	-----

Zero to Thirteen

Birth, naming, circumcision, Pidyon Haben, Bar and Bat Mitzvah

“Fill the Earth”

God blessed His creations with the ability to be creators themselves: human beings are commanded to have children and populate the earth. The commandment to procreate is actually the very first *mitzvah* to appear in the Torah.

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land and subdue it ...”

God blessed Noah and his sons, and He said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”¹

These verses refer to an individual’s obligation to have children. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet also teaches us that that God desires us to have children in order to “inhabit the land.”²

Throughout our history the Sages have emphasized the importance of this *mitzvah*, seeing in it the primary means of fulfilling our national purpose, propagating Torah values and transmitting the message of monotheism to the rest of world. The great Italian Kabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Recanati, explains that this *mitzvah* is vital on an individual level as well,

because it is a way of actually imitating God, creating human beings in His image:

The reason for this mitzvah is to demonstrate that the existence of the world is dependent on the fulfillment of the Torah; that a person should leave descendants who will fulfill the Torah and the mitzvot in his place, and who will acknowledge that there is an omnipotent Creator Who directs the world ... He also becomes a partner with God in creation. When he has children he has created the image of God,³ and when his children are good people he has created the likeness⁴ of God.⁵

At the simplest level, the *Sefer Hachinuch* (the classic encyclopedia of all the *mitzvot* and their rationale) explains that it is this *mitzvah* that enables all other *mitzvot* to be fulfilled. Without human beings there would be no one to freely choose to do God's will.⁶

As each generation makes these choices and progresses in its spiritual development, it transmits these achievements to those who follow and advances the progress of humanity's "spiritual evolution." In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Whatever progress you have made in the fear of God, in the love of God, in trust in God, and in filling your life with God, transmit it to the younger generation and perpetuate it in your children and thereby in yourselves... There can be no higher activity than to contribute to the presence on earth of human beings, in order to train them for the perfection of humanity, and there is no greater blessing than to succeed in this endeavor.⁷

Who Is Commanded?

Interestingly, the Torah only obligates men to have children; for women, this *mitzvah* is voluntary⁸ (although many commentaries maintain that a woman is obligated in the directive of the prophets to "inhabit the world."⁹). A number of explanations have been suggested for this exemption. Since childbirth entails great pain as well as a degree of risk (even more so in earlier generations), God did not deem it appropriate to place a legal obligation on women to have children. Consistent with Jewish law's concern for life, the Torah did not want to declare that a woman who did not want to go through this danger and pain was in any way doing something wrong and so it left this as a voluntary act.

It is also possible that a woman has a natural desire to create and nurture and therefore does not have to be commanded to do so. On the other hand, for a man this desire is not built in and he needs the added stimulus of a commandment to have children.

Some point out that since it is the woman who actually bears the child, this is the primary way in which she imitates God as Creator. To obligate her in this matter would therefore undermine the entire objective. Just as God's creation of the world was an act of pure, altruistic giving and goodness on His part, so too, when a woman has a child, it is an act of altruistic giving.¹⁰

How Many?

Jewish law states that a couple should have at least one son and one daughter — mirroring the original creation of Adam and Eve. Based on the verse in Isaiah however, Rabbinic law states that under general circumstances one should not limit the size of his family.¹¹

This imperative to have many children must always be weighed, however, against possible risks to the mother. There is no question that both the mother's physical and mental health is paramount, and therefore Jewish law does allow — and in some cases, requires — family planning.¹² Clearly, each situation has its own unique considerations; family planning should not be undertaken without Rabbinic guidance.

Human life is endowed with sanctity because we are the “image of God.” Every life, even that of a fetus, is precious in the eyes of the Torah and therefore, Judaism forbids aborting a fetus¹³ and obligates us to try to save the life of an unborn baby¹⁴ with the same urgency that would apply to any other person.¹⁵ The fetus has a soul which is of infinite spiritual value and any interference with it must be approached with an awareness of its identity as a unique, spiritual soul. If, however, the mother's life is threatened by giving birth to or carrying the baby, or if the pregnancy presents a severe threat to the mother's physical or mental health, Jewish law permits,¹⁶ and even requires, an abortion to be performed¹⁷ just as it permits someone to defend his or her life against an attacker by killing the attacker. Since these are questions of life and death, and involve the very definition of where life itself begins, a competent Jewish legal authority must be consulted in every case.

Too Many Jews?

The Jewish people have always been small in number compared to other nations, and therefore, every single Jew is important to the Jewish people.

And you will remain few in number among the nations to which God shall lead you. It is not because you have greater

*numbers than all the other nations that God embraced you and chose you; for you are among the smallest of all the nations.*¹⁸

The Talmud states that a minimum number of souls must be present in the world for the Divine Presence to rest on the Jewish people¹⁹ and that the Messiah will not come until all souls destined to be born have arrived in the world.²⁰ Every child is therefore an incredible blessing, not just for the parents, but for the entire Jewish people and the entire world.

Happy Birthday!

The birth of a child is an occasion of great joy, but also of great stress. As we would expect, Judaism has guidelines for dealing with all aspects of this event. The health of the mother and child are our primary concern and first priority: prospective parents must make all arrangements, medical and otherwise, to the best of their ability. It is expressly forbidden to wrap oneself in a cloak of false piety and say, “God will help us.” Rather, we are obligated to act with responsibility and not to rely on miracles.²¹

The husband, wife and all concerned parties should be aware that, according to Jewish law, a woman is considered to be as medically vulnerable as one who is “dangerously ill” from the onset of labor until three days after parturition. Even the Sabbath may be “desecrated”²² for her needs.²³ The three-day post-partum period applies to every healthy woman, but if complications arise beyond these three days, her needs continue to override the Sabbath. This is true even if the mother feels that she has a specific need unconfirmed by medical opinion.²⁴

Mazal Tov! It’s a Baby!

The birth of a girl is celebrated with a reception, usually held at the synagogue, but sometimes at home, on a Sabbath around the time of her birth. Since the reception is held immediately after services on Sabbath morning and *Kiddush*²⁵ is recited then, the reception is known as a “*Kiddush*.” In many Sephardic communities,²⁶ it is customary to have an evening celebration called a *Zeved Bat*, “Gift of the Daughter.” Special prayers for the health of the mother and baby and the spiritual growth of the child are recited at this time.

A baby girl is named in the synagogue (she does not have to be present) when her father is called up to the Torah,²⁷ usually on the Shabbat following her birth. The following blessing is recited by the *gabbai* (sexton) or, in some synagogues, the rabbi:

“He Who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — may He bless the woman who has given birth (*mother’s Hebrew name*) daughter of (*Hebrew name of mother’s father*) with her daughter who has been born at an auspicious time, and may her name be called in Israel (*baby’s Hebrew name*) daughter of (*baby’s father’s Hebrew name*) — for her husband, the infant’s father, will contribute to charity on their behalf. In reward for this, may they raise her to [the fulfillment of] Torah, marriage and good deeds. Now let us respond: Amen.”²⁸

A prayer is then recited for the complete recovery of the mother and the health of the child.

In Ashkenazic²⁹ communities, the celebration of a boy’s birth is held on the first Friday night after his birth and is known as a *Shalom Zachor*, “Welcoming the Boy.” Its origins date back over 1,500 years, to the Talmudic era.³⁰ Spiritually, it is a prelude to the circumcision³¹ which will be held on the eighth day after his birth, because the child’s soul must experience a Shabbat before the circumcision.³² The gathering also serves to comfort the child’s soul upon leaving the purely spiritual world with its unlimited perception of Torah, and entering the physical world of confusion and conflict.³³ The words of Torah and songs of joy and prayer on this night provide reassurance that the spiritual can be found here as well.

The boy is circumcised on the eighth day (health permitting) and is named immediately after the circumcision, just as our Patriarch Abraham received a new name after his circumcision.³⁴ Usually a rabbi, but sometimes a relative or friend, is honored with reciting the naming prayer. The father whispers the baby’s name at the appropriate place in the prayer, and the name is repeated aloud by the person naming him:

“Our God and the God of our forefathers preserve this child for his father and mother, and may his name be called in Israel (*baby’s Hebrew name*) son of (*father’s Hebrew name*). May his father rejoice in the issue of his loins and may his mother exult in the fruit of her womb, as it is written; ‘May your father and mother rejoice and may she who gave birth to you exult’³⁵... May this little one (*baby’s Hebrew name*) son of (*father’s Hebrew name*) become great. Just as he has entered the Covenant so may he enter into the Torah, the marriage canopy and good deeds.”³⁶

As with a baby girl, a blessing is recited at this point for the complete recovery of the mother and for the health of the baby.

What’s in a Name?

From the very beginnings of history, names have held great significance. On the sixth day of Creation, Adam gave names to all the creatures

on earth. The Torah implies that due to the highly sensitive spiritual perceptions given to Adam, these names were expressions of the very essence of each being.³⁷ “*And whatever Adam called each living creature, that remained its name.*”³⁸

When God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants He changed their names from *Avram* to *Avraham*, and from *Sarai* to *Sarah*. He added the Hebrew letter “*heh*,” a component of the Divine Name, to each of their names, which also changed the meanings to denote “ancestors of many nations.”³⁹ Throughout hundreds of years of slavery and oppression in Egypt, the Jewish people, to their great merit, managed to preserve their national identity.⁴⁰ Jewish sources relate that they were able to remain distinct from the Egyptians and avoid assimilation because they did not change their names, their traditional clothing or their language.⁴¹

Tradition tells us that today one of the last remnants of prophecy we retain is a measure of Divine inspiration when giving a child his/her Hebrew name!⁴² The Sages maintain that a person’s name can have a strong impact on his or her development.⁴³ They cautioned us, therefore, to choose thoughtfully, and select a name that is associated with righteousness and good.⁴⁴ Naming a child after a righteous individual may also serve as an inspiration to emulate his or her ways.

Ashkenazic Jews generally name children after deceased relatives,⁴⁵ while most Sephardic Jews name children after living relatives.⁴⁶ It is the practice among all groups to name children after righteous people in the Bible and Talmud or with a name associated with the time of year when the child was born. Some examples of seasonal names would be Mordechai or Esther for a child born close to the festival of Purim,⁴⁷ Avivah (spring) for a girl born in the spring, and Nachum or Nechamah (comfort) for a child born on or around the mournful Ninth of Av.⁴⁸ Sometimes names may also be an expression of prayer, such as, Chaim (life) for a boy, or Bracha (blessing) for a girl.

Due to the pressures of anti-Semitism, government bureaucracy and difficulty of pronunciation, many Jews throughout history have also given their children names in languages other than Hebrew. Sometimes, these names are translations or transliterations of the Hebrew; sometimes they are just similar sounding, though often they bear no relationship at all to the Hebrew name. There is no objection in Jewish law to using someone’s non-Hebrew name,⁴⁹ and even many great Sages were known by vernacular names.⁵⁰ In our multicultural society, however, using one’s Hebrew name is considerably more acceptable than it was in the past. Today, many observant Jews use their Hebrew name exclusively.

One’s Hebrew name reflects a person’s essential, primary identity. At any major life event, such as marriage, or for any religious purpose,

such as being called up to the Torah, it is the Hebrew name that is always used.

Circumcision – Engraving an Eternal Covenant

When God made a Covenant to establish a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants, He decreed that a sign of the Covenant should be indelibly marked on the bodies of all Abraham and Sarah's male descendants. Circumcision, *brit milah* or *bris*, is the sign of that Covenant between God and the Jewish people.

*God spoke to Abraham saying, "...This is My Covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you — every male child among you shall be circumcised."*⁵¹

Brit milah has tremendous significance, therefore, because it is both a *mitzvah* and a sign of the eternal Covenant between God and the Jewish people.⁵² It is the way in which the Jewish people demonstrate their willingness to be joined in partnership with God. So too, a Gentile who converts to Judaism enters into the Covenant through *brit milah*.⁵³

The *Sefer Hachinuch*⁵⁴ explains that this particular *mitzvah* was designated for the Covenant because "God wanted a permanent sign engraved on the nation that He has chosen, to separate them from other nations in the nature of their physical body, as they are separate from the nations in the nature of their soul..." and He also wanted us to understand that just as the perfection of the body is done by a conscious human action, so too the perfection of the soul is left up to the human's free will.

Other commentaries⁵⁵ maintain that circumcision reminds a Jew that he must be in control of his passions and desires, not be controlled by them. The only way for the Jewish people to continue as God's chosen nation, to maintain their allegiance to the Torah through all the vicissitudes of history, is for them to be disciplined masters of self-control. Since sexual urges are among the most powerful of human forces, the sign of Jewish "chosenness" was placed on the reproductive organ. This sign also reminds us to distance ourselves from any type of sexual immorality and to maintain the purity and holiness of the family and marital relations.⁵⁶ This is one reason that this sign is only placed on men, who are more inclined to promiscuity and licentiousness than women.

Why the Eighth Day? It's Out of This World!

The Torah specifies that the circumcision must be performed on the eighth day after birth,⁵⁷ even if this is a Sabbath.⁵⁸ It is not a coinci-

dence that the eighth commandment God gave to humanity was that of circumcision.⁵⁹ Numbers are of great consequence in Judaism and they are often used as a code or to hint at certain concepts. When a number forms an integral part of a *mitzvah*, it is certainly not arbitrary. What then is the meaning of the number eight?

The significance of a number can be understood by the way it is used in the Torah, especially the first time that it occurs in the Biblical text. The number 6, which appears first as the six days of Creation, symbolizes the expansion and creation of the physical world. Sabbath, which is the spiritual dimension that forms the focus of the physical world, is the seventh day. The physical world expands to the north, south, east, west, up and down. Six has no center, it has three points on one side and three on the other (** * **). The seventh day, the Sabbath, is the spiritual center point around which the physical world revolves. It is the Godliness within the world, the point around which the six days of physical creation are arrayed (** Sabbath **).⁶⁰

Eight symbolizes going *beyond* the natural world, beyond the seven days of Creation, into the realm of the supernatural.⁶¹ Circumcision is an act which changes and improves on nature, which demonstrates the human ability to go beyond nature into the realm of the supernatural. That is the metaphysical reason why circumcision, the eighth commandment, must always be on the eighth day.

On a pragmatic note, Maimonides, who was a physician in addition to being a great Torah scholar, explained that on the eighth day, but not before, the child is strong enough to be circumcised.⁶² In fact, current medical research regarding blood coagulation suggests that the eighth day is the earliest advisable time to perform circumcision.⁶³

What Is Circumcision?

Circumcision involves three acts — *chituch* (excision), *priah* (uncovering) and *metzitzah* (drawing out). *Chituch* is the excision of the entire foreskin covering the glans (head of the penis). The foreskin is removed so that the entire glans is visible. *Priah* is peeling back from the glans the thin membrane that usually adheres to it and folding it back so that it remains behind the corona. *Metzitzah* involves extracting blood from the wound, primarily for therapeutic reasons.⁶⁴

Since the act of circumcision is not merely a medical procedure, but the means of joining God's Covenant with Abraham, it must be performed by one who is part of that Covenant, a member of the Jewish people.⁶⁵ The person who performs the circumcision is known as a *mohel*. He may be a doctor, but is not necessarily so. Every *mohel*, however, must undergo intense training in order to be certified. An expert *mohel* can be found in

most Jewish communities. In places where there is no local *mohel*, one will come to perform the *brit* even if staying over Shabbat is necessary.

The Ceremony: A Holy Moment ... (Then Back to Mommy!)

The circumcision should be held as soon as possible on the morning of the eighth day, usually right after the morning service.⁶⁶ Traditionally, a number of people are honored to play key roles in the ceremony. The child is placed on a special decorated pillow and brought from the mother by another married woman. She hands the baby to her husband, who then gives him to the father. This honored couple is known as the *kvatters* (a Yiddish contraction of the German word for godfather).⁶⁷ The father holds the child, recites *Shema Yisrael* and several additional prayers. Someone is then honored to take the child and place him on a chair designated as the Chair of Elijah, the prophet who exhorted the Jewish people to keep the covenant of circumcision. The baby is then placed on the knees of the *sandak*, the person whose privilege it is to hold him during the circumcision. Ideally, the father is supposed to perform the circumcision himself. For most people, this is impossible due to their lack of training and/or nervousness, so at this point the father officially appoints the *mohel* as his agent in this task. The *mohel* then recites a blessing and performs the circumcision:

*Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us regarding circumcision.*⁶⁸

The father immediately continues:

*Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham, our forefather.*⁶⁹

All present then respond:

*Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the [study of] Torah, the marriage ceremony, and [the performance of] good deeds.*⁷⁰

After the circumcision, which usually takes only a few moments, the child is held by another honoree while someone else raises a cup of wine and recites several blessings, along with a special prayer for naming the child. The infant is then taken back to his mother by the *kvatters*. The *mohel* usually makes one or two follow-up home visits to check the heal-

ing process and change the dressing. In most cases, the baby is healed in about a week.

Redemption of the Firstborn – Pidyon Haben

The final plague that God brought upon the Egyptians prior to the Exodus was the sudden deaths of all first-born Egyptians.⁷¹ Why was this punishment directed specifically against the firstborn? Some scholars⁷² explain that the firstborn were generally the leaders of each family, as well as the priests of the Egyptian religion. Since they were the moral and cultural role models and leaders of Egypt, they were most responsible for the evils that were perpetrated against the Jews.

Shortly after describing this plague, the Torah commands the Jewish people to sanctify their own first-born sons.⁷³ These firstborn were designated to be the antithesis of the Egyptian firstborn, i.e., to lead the Jewish people, and by their example the entire world, toward moral and spiritual excellence. The text goes on to explain that at the moment that God killed the Egyptian firstborn, He acquired the firstborn of the Jews as His own.⁷⁴

Initially, all first-born Jewish males were intended to serve as priests in God's Holy Temple. After the terrible transgression of the Jewish people in worshipping the Golden Calf, however, the first-born sons no longer deserved to fulfill this role. Only the tribe of Levi, who had not participated in this sin, was worthy to serve in the Sanctuary. (The Sanctuary, or *Mishkan*, was the house of worship in the desert following the Exodus and in the early years of the Hebrews' settlement in the Land of Israel. Later, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem served this purpose.) The Levites who descended from Aaron, brother of Moses, became the priests, the *Kohanim* of the Jewish people. From that time on, it became an obligation to carry out an exchange, called *Pidyon Haben*, in which the first-born is, so to speak, redeemed from his obligation to serve as a priest and leader when his parents give the *Kohen* five silver coins.⁷⁵

It is a *mitzvah* for every Jewish male (who is not a *Kohen* or a Levite) to redeem his first-born son, born to a Jewish mother (who is not the daughter of a *Kohen* or Levite), when the child is thirty-one days old.⁷⁶ The redemption is performed by the father giving to the *Kohen* 105 grams, or 3.7 ounces, of silver or its equivalent in five coins that have the same value.⁷⁷ At current prices, that is worth about \$18 - \$20 US each. (If a father did not redeem his first-born son, the grown son is obligated to redeem himself from a *Kohen*.⁷⁸)

In his commentary on the Torah,⁷⁹ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that the *Pidyon Haben* frees the firstborn from his position as

a priest in the Sanctuary in order for him to assume the duties of moral leadership in his family and in society.

The Pidyon Haben Ceremony: Life on a Silver Platter

The *Kohen* is presented with the child, who has been placed on a large silver tray to enhance and honor the *mitzvah*. In order to give the maximum number of people an opportunity to participate in some way in this *mitzvah*, it is customary to place small packages of sugar and garlic around the child. These items can be taken home and used to flavor foods, thereby giving many people a “taste” of the *mitzvah*.⁸⁰ It is also customary to adorn the tray with jewelry to beautify the *mitzvah*. Immediately before giving the *Kohen* the silver coins, the father recites two blessings:

Blessed are You, God, Our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us regarding the “Redemption of the Son.”

*Blessed are You, God, Our God, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.*⁸¹

As with many *mitzvot*, the fulfillment of *Pidyon Haben* is celebrated with a festive meal of bread, meat and wine, during which traditional songs are sung and inspirational words of Torah are shared.⁸²

The First Haircut: A Snip in Time

The custom of letting a little boy’s hair grow until he is 3 years old originated with the early Kabbalists in Israel and was popularized by the Chassidic movement in the 18th century. The custom went out of favor in the American Jewish community for several decades, but has now become quite widespread once again.

By the age of three, it is presumed that the child understands enough to begin learning about the commandments⁸³ and it is customary to begin a more “formal” level of education about the *mitzvot*. He usually begins wearing a *yarmulke* and *tzitzit* (see Chapter 18) and starts to learn the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It became customary to give a boy his first haircut at this time as a vivid way of teaching him in the commandment of “*payot*”(sideburns)⁸⁴ — the prohibition against completely removing the hair on the sides of the head. This first haircut is known as “*Upsherin*” from the Yiddish *upfsherin*, which means “cutting off.”

Some commentaries suggest that this custom is based on the commandment of *orlah*:⁸⁵ The Torah prohibits the use of all fruits that grow during the first three years after a tree is planted. The Torah is referred to as the Tree of Life.⁸⁶ Just as the fruits of a tree cannot be enjoyed in its first three years, so too, the Torah is not really accessible to a child until age three, due to his intellectual limitations. By the time he is 3, the child has developed sufficiently for his parents to start teaching him the Torah and for him to begin performing some of the commandments. He finally gets to taste the sweet fruit of the “Tree of Life.”

Some families hold a small celebration on the occasion of this first haircut, to express thanks to God for the opportunity to transmit the Torah to the next generation. It also serves to teach the young child the importance of *mitzvot* and demonstrates how precious the *mitzvot* are to his family. It is customary, if possible, to honor a Torah scholar with snipping the first bit of hair. Some people even weigh the cut hair and give the equivalent weight in gold or silver to charity.⁸⁷

Bat Mitzvah and Bar Mitzvah: Is the Party Over, or Just Beginning?

The greatest milestone in the life of a young boy or girl is becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah*, reaching adulthood. According to Jewish law, a girl becomes an adult at 12 years and a day, when she enters her thirteenth year, and a boy at 13 years and a day, when he enters his fourteenth year.⁸⁸ The literal translation of *bar* (masculine) and *bat* (feminine) *mitzvah* conveys the real significance of becoming a Jewish adult. The term means one who is obligated to perform the commandments.⁸⁹

Up to this point, the parents are obligated to educate their child in moral behavior and observance of the commandments. It is the parents who are responsible for their child’s behavior.⁹⁰ Once the child reaches age twelve, for a girl, and thirteen, for a boy, Jewish law considers them adults and the responsibility becomes their own.⁹¹ They may now enter into legal contracts, incur legal obligations and are obligated to observe all commandments applicable to them. (Of course, the education of the child in Jewish values continues to rest with the parents until the child is an independent adult.)

The Metaphysical Side – Welcoming the Soul

Jewish tradition describes different stages in the development of the soul-body relationship. The soul first descends into the world when the

child is still a fetus in its mother's womb. At this stage, the fetus has a completely pure soul without any desire for evil at all. According to tradition, an angel teaches it the entire Torah during this time. One understanding of this angelic tutorial is as a metaphor for the untainted, pure perception of the truth that the soul has before entering this world. Therefore the Torah is actually inherent in the Jewish soul and is its natural status quo.⁹² The child must, however, be born into this world of concealment and illusion in order to achieve moral success through its own free will and its own struggle. At birth, the "evil inclination" enters a person, i.e., he or she loses that incredible clarity that they possessed before entering this world. The soul's desires are overshadowed by the physicality of the body and its yearning for spiritual fulfillment is muted by ego, selfishness and materialism. Childhood is a time when the physical world and all its overwhelming desires rule over the human being, and the soul and its aspirations are largely dormant. It is for this reason that a child is not held legally responsible for his/her actions.⁹³

Toward the end of childhood — during a girl's twelfth or a boy's thirteenth year — the soul begins to awaken and manifests itself more overtly.⁹⁴ When the child reaches adulthood, the soul has reached its full level of activity and therefore this person now has complete free will. He or she is able to choose between good and evil, the spiritual and the material, between egotism and humility, to engage in a full range of moral decisions. Since they now have both a "good inclination" and an "evil inclination" and the ability to choose between the two, they are fully accountable for their actions.⁹⁵

Is This Something to Celebrate?

In the Western world, reaching legal adulthood usually means that one now has certain rights that he or she did not have before. The "new" adult now has the right to drive, to vote, to buy cigarettes and alcohol, to get a credit card and so on. It is a time to enjoy doing many things that were previously not allowed, a celebration of rights and the loosening of restrictions. This view is in stark contrast to the significance of reaching *bar/bat mitzvah*. We celebrate the fact that the child has matured sufficiently to become obligated in the *mitzvot*, to enter a community and join the historical chain that began with Abraham and Sarah.

The occasion of becoming obligated in the commandments is a time of joy and happiness because we understand that the *mitzvot* are not only obligations but also gifts from God, opportunities to become better people. Just as we celebrate the festival of Shavuot when God gave us the Torah on Mt. Sinai — transforming a group of ex-slaves into the Chosen People — so too we celebrate reaching the age of *mitzvot* as our own per-

sonal encounter at Sinai.⁹⁶ Furthermore, now that the person is obligated in the commandments, he or she can now actually earn greater reward because the *mitzvah* is done through a free-will decision.⁹⁷

The Bar Mitzvah celebration is traditionally celebrated with a festive meal⁹⁸ for family, friends, rabbis and teachers.⁹⁹ Ideally, this celebration should be held on the actual day that the child becomes a *bar mitzvah*.¹⁰⁰ Speeches on Torah subjects are traditional at the meal. Torah thoughts are expressed to inspire the *bar mitzvah* in his new stage in life.¹⁰¹ Many communities hold a similar celebration for a *bat mitzvah*. In some circles, a *Kiddush* (a celebratory reception) is held at the synagogue on the Shabbat closest to a girl's *bat mitzvah* birthday in lieu of a larger public reception.

There is clearly no obligation to have a reception worthy of a coronation, to rent a luxury hotel for the weekend or to pay for a Cordon Bleu meal for 800 of your closest friends, complete with a symphony orchestra and the Cirque du Soleil. The excesses of the modern Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration are a departure from the ancient customs —and they actually send a message to the boy or girl that is the antithesis of this holy occasion. Extravagant spending, silly speeches, embarrassing childhood photographs, Hollywood-themed events (and worse) are not likely to inspire the *bar/bat mitzvah* to spiritual and moral growth. Regarding this problem, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the greatest 20th-century halachic authority, said:

*If I had the power, I would abolish the entire Bar Mitzvah ceremony that is the custom in this country [the United States]. For as it is known, it has not brought even one person closer to the Torah and the mitzvot, let alone the bar mitzvah boy, not even for a short time. On the contrary, in many places it has led to transgression of the Torah ...*¹⁰²

Role Call

One of the most obvious consequences of a boy reaching the age of *bar mitzvah* is that he participates in the synagogue service as an adult. He may now be counted as part of a *minyan* and may also be called up to the Torah and read it for the congregation.¹⁰³ To mark this change in status, it is customary for the boy to be called up to the Torah at the earliest possible opportunity. If he becomes a *bar mitzvah* on a day when there is Torah reading (Monday, Thursday, Shabbat and special occasions) he is called up that day. If there is no Torah reading on that day, he is called up on the next occasion at which the Torah is read.¹⁰⁴ In many communities, it is the common practice for a boy to read the portion of the week on the

Shabbat immediately following or coinciding with his *bar mitzvah* day. In other communities, the boy is called up to the Torah, reads only the last section of the weekly portion, the *Maftir*, and then reads the *Haftarah*, the section of the Prophets that is read after the last section of the Torah reading.¹⁰⁵ The idea behind these customs is to impress upon the *bar mitzvah* boy the significance of this day and of the new responsibilities which rest upon him.

The blessings that the boy recites before and after the Torah reading are the same ones recited every time a person is called up to the Torah. On this day, however, they bear special significance for him.

Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah. Blessed are You, God, Giver of the Torah.

*Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, Who gave us the Torah of truth and implanted eternal life within us. Blessed are You, God, Giver of the Torah.*¹⁰⁶

After the boy recites the second blessing, his father continues with a most unusual blessing: "Blessed is the One Who has freed me from the punishment for this boy."¹⁰⁷ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the significance of these practices.

*In the public community... of which he [the bar mitzvah boy] has now become a member... he makes a declaration over the Torah, to the fulfillment of which his life is from now on dedicated. For the first time, he declares the comprehensive resolve concerning the Torah in its presence: that he dedicates himself to the service of Him Who has chosen Israel for a special task in life, and has given them His Torah for its fulfillment. He promises to be loyal in the service of Him Who has given us the Torah of truth, thereby planting eternal life in our midst. On the same day, the father also declares his resolve to fulfill the task set him by this new relationship with his son ... From this day, it is the son who now independently bears the blame, as well as the merit, for his own life.*¹⁰⁸

Jewish Wrap

Parents train their children to perform *mitzvot* long before they are obligated to do so. They encourage them to anticipate adulthood by accepting certain responsibilities before their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, however, is approached very differently. Wearing *tefillin* requires physical cleanliness, purity of thought and the ability to focus on

the *tefillin* as long as they are being worn. Because of the sanctity of *tefillin* and the maturity necessary to properly fulfill the obligations upon one who wears them, a boy does not begin wearing *tefillin* until shortly before his *bar mitzvah* day. In some communities, he begins practicing putting them on two or three months before the *bar mitzvah* day. Most commonly, the boy begins one month before, while in other communities he first puts on *tefillin* on the day he becomes a true *bar mitzvah*.¹⁰⁹ If the boy begins wearing *tefillin* before his *bar mitzvah* day, it is customary to arrange a small festive breakfast at the synagogue or at his school on the morning that he first puts on *tefillin*.

It's Eli Levy's Bar Mitzvah Day!

Eli Levy started preparing for his Bar Mitzvah from the day he was born. His parents, family, teachers, rabbis and friends provided a community that warmly nurtured his gradual progress toward increasing study of Torah and observance of its commandments. In the Levy family, saying a blessing before eating, praying every day, studying Torah, giving charity and doing acts of kindness are as normal as apple pie and baseball (which they also enjoy regularly). Eli's preparation for the actual day he would become a bar mitzvah started about two years earlier.

*When Eli turned 11, he decided that he would like to learn a specific tractate of the Talmud¹¹⁰ and complete it in time for his Bar Mitzvah celebration. This was not unusual at his school; in fact, many of the boys in his class were engaged in extracurricular study in order to complete a tractate, or in some cases the entire Mishnah,¹¹¹ in time for their Bar Mitzvah. The completion of a tractate or section of the Talmud is an occasion for a celebration in itself. It is called a *siyum*. At a *siyum*, certain prayers are said and a *seudat mitzvah*, festive meal, is eaten. Of course, the Bar Mitzvah meal in itself is a *seudat mitzvah*, but Eli and his parents felt that it would be greatly enhanced by the completion of a Torah-learning project.¹¹² Eli also intends to base his *drashah* [Torah speech] on something that he studied in the tractate. Mr. Levy set aside an hour, two or three times a week, as well as some time on Shabbat, to study with Eli. He will also help Eli prepare his *drashah* as the day of the Bar Mitzvah approaches.*

*In the Levy family, it has always been customary for the boys to read the Torah portion, the *parshah*, in the synagogue. Shlomo, Eli's older brother, is an expert *ba'al koreh*, Torah reader, so he began teaching Eli how to read the Torah about a year before the*

Bar Mitzvah. This is not so simple, even for someone like Eli, whose Hebrew is excellent.

The Torah is read from a scroll that has no punctuation and no vowel signs. (In Hebrew, the vowels are separate characters distinct from the consonant letters, and are necessary to know how to pronounce a word.) In addition, the ba'al koreh must sing the Torah portion using the traditional cantillation, with each sentence and phrase having its own unique combination of musical modulations. In essence, the bar mitzvah boy has to know his entire portion, sometimes up to 150 verses, virtually by heart, with precise pronunciation and chant. There is also the discomfoting fact that the congregation will correct the ba'al koreh if he makes a mistake, since no inaccuracy is allowed or overlooked when reading the Torah.

Shlomo is a patient teacher; nevertheless Eli feels the pressure as the time of his Bar Mitzvah approaches. He has reviewed his parshah so often that his sisters, Tova and Esther, know parts of it as well as he does. Mr. and Mrs. Levy offered Eli the option of not reading the Torah portion, but a combination of pride, stubbornness and a desire to have the skill of a ba'al koreh made Eli decide to persevere.

The Levys are planning a Kiddush (festive reception) at the synagogue after prayers on Shabbat so the entire congregation can participate in the celebration. Eli's thirteenth birthday (on the Jewish calendar) is actually on a Thursday, so he will read a small part of his Torah portion and be called up that morning. The celebratory meal is planned for the night before his birthday (which in the Jewish calendar is already the day of his Bar Mitzvah) and will take place at the synagogue's reception hall. The Levys' immediate and extended family (living within a reasonable distance) number about 75. With Eli's class of 20, close family, friends, rabbis and teachers, there will be about 150 people at the Bar Mitzvah. A tasty, but not elaborate, three-course meal is planned. A local yeshivah student will provide lively entertainment playing the keyboard; and short speeches will be given by Eli, Mr. Levy, the rabbi of the synagogue and Eli's grandfather.

As the date approaches, Eli goes with his mother to buy a new suit, shirt and tie for his Bar Mitzvah. His father orders tefillin from a sofer, a scribe that he knows in Jerusalem, who has supplied the Levy family with all their tefillin. Eli's sister Tova, who is artistic and computer savvy, prints up invitations on postcards and addresses them using the database of contacts from her Bat Mitzvah and Shlomo's Bar Mitzvah.

The Monday before his Bar Mitzvah, Eli's grandparents fly in from Australia and his grandfather fine-tunes Eli's Torah reading (which by now Eli knows as well as his phone number). Mrs. Levy has been baking delicacies for the Kiddush for the past month: the freezer is full and the neighbors are storing much of the food for the Shabbat meals. Quite a few relatives are coming for Shabbat and the Levys have arranged places for all of them to stay in the community. They will be having 35 relatives for all the Shabbat meals — a bit of a squeeze, but a lot of fun — especially for all the cousins who rarely see each other.

On Wednesday night the whole family goes to the reception hall early to make sure that everything is ready. A table of cakes and drinks has been set up for the early arrivals. The meal starts, accompanied by music on the keyboard. Between courses, the boys from Eli's class get up and start dancing in a circle and singing to the lively music. Many of the adults join the dancing as well, with the rabbi, Mr. Levy, the grandfathers and Eli's teachers all taking turns to dance with Eli in the middle of the circle of dancers.

After the main course is served, Eli gets up to give his speech. About one minute into the speech, the boys in his class start singing and interrupting him. They do this a few times, but Eli insists on carrying on with his well-prepared drashah and the siyum. The custom of singing and interrupting the bar mitzvah boy's speech actually gives an opportunity to a boy, who really does not want to continue, to stop without embarrassment.¹¹³ The evening finishes with a few more speeches, more dancing and singing, and taking pictures to remember the occasion. Most of the presents Eli receives are Jewish books, and he is thrilled to receive them. Generally a child begins to build his or her own library of Torah works at bar/bat mitzvah age.

Thursday morning arrives, and Eli and his family go to the synagogue for the 7 a.m. morning service. Eli reads the Torah beautifully and is called up to the Torah to say the blessings. When his father finishes his blessing, everyone in the synagogue sings and shouts "Mazal Tov!" After the service, Mr. Levy puts out some liquor, pastries and orange juice, the traditional midweek celebration breakfast at their synagogue.

On Friday, the Levys put up extra tables in the dining room to accommodate all the relatives staying in the neighborhood and eating with them. The whole family pitches in to prepare the meals and set the table. The children go by bike to deliver small gifts to each of the families hosting someone for Shabbat. On Shabbat itself, everyone joins in the singing at the meals and children and adults take turns to explain a brief idea about the parshah. Shabbat

morning services begin at 8:30 a.m., and Eli has some hot tea with honey, at the insistence of his grandfather, before he goes to the synagogue.

The reading of the Torah begins at about 9:30. The shul is packed with relatives and friends. Eli begins his reading with a hint of nervousness in his voice, but as he continues he becomes more confident, chanting louder and faster. Shlomo stands near him on the bimah (the platform from which the Torah is read) to encourage, correct and help him if necessary. After he finishes, everyone sings and people crowd around Eli and his parents, wishing them “Mazal Tov, Mazal Tov!”

Eli’s main emotion now is relief that he performed well and that the public “show” is over. He knows however, that becoming a bar mitzvah is actually the beginning of a new era for him. He understands that he is now responsible for his own actions and has joined the Jewish people as a full participant in its national goals and purpose. It’s a great day for him and for all of his fellow Jews!

For Further Reading

- ▶ *Bris Milah* by Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn (ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1986)
- ▶ *Positive Parenting: Developing Your Child’s Potential* by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. and Ursula Schwartz, Ph.D. (ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1999)
- ▶ *The Bat Mitzvah Treasury* by Rabbi Yonah Weinrib (Judaica Illuminations/Mesorah, 2004)
- ▶ *To Kindle a Soul* by Rabbi Lawrence Keleman (Targum/Feldheim, 2001)
- ▶ *To Raise a Jewish Child* by Haim Halevy Donin (Basic Books, 1991)

NOTES

References to books of the Talmud refer to the Babylonian Talmud unless otherwise noted.

1. Genesis 1:28; 9:1.
2. Isaiah 45:18.
3. Genesis 1:27.
4. Ibid. 5:1.
5. Rabbi Menachem Recanati, *Sefer Taamei Hamitzvot*, Mitzvah 1.
6. Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Barcelona, *Sefer Hachinuch*, Mitzvah 1.
7. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, Section V, Mitzvoth, Chap. 80, para. 523.
8. *Yevamot* 65b; *Code of Jewish Law, Even Haezer* 1:1.
9. *Beit Shmuel, Even Haezer* 1:2; Rabbeinu Nissim, Responsa 32.
10. First reason is from Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, *Meshech Chochmah, Parshat Bereshit*. Latter reason as heard from my teacher, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro.
11. *Yevamot* 61b, 62a, 62b.
12. *Yevamot* 12b,65b; Rabbi Isaiah Karelitz, *Chazon Ish*, Quoted in *Assia (Journal of Jewish Medical Ethics)* Vol. 4, p. 175; Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Even Haezer* 3:24, 4:74.
13. Genesis 9:6, *Sanhedrin* 57b.
14. Novellae of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Homicide.
15. *Arachin* 7a.
16. Mishnah, *Oholot* 7:6.
17. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Homicide 1:9.
18. Deuteronomy 4:27, 7:7.
19. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, 74:41; Rashi, Numbers 11:36.
20. *Yevamot* 62a.
21. *Shabbat* 32a, *Bava Kamma* 91b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Intellect 4:1, Laws of Homicide 11:5.
22. "Desecrated" is in quotes because this is not really desecration of Sabbath, since the Torah permits, indeed obligates, one to save a life even if it involves doing normally forbidden activities on Sabbath.
23. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 330:1.
24. Ibid. 330:4.
25. See chapter on Shabbat.
26. Jews of Spanish-Portuguese, Middle Eastern and North African origin.
27. See chapter on Prayer.
28. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, New York, 1984, pp. 442-443.
29. Jews of Eastern European origin.
30. *Bava Kamma* 80a, *Tosafot* ad loc. "*Lebey yeshuah haben.*"
31. *Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah*, 265:12, Ramah.
32. *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus, 27:10.
33. *Code of Jewish Law*, *ibid.*, *Turei Zahav* ad loc.13.
34. Genesis 17:4-5.
35. Proverbs 23:25.
36. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 212-213.
37. Rabbeinu Bachya, Commentary on Genesis, 2:19.
38. Genesis 2:19.
39. Genesis 17:4-5.
40. Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem*, Chap. 43.
41. *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus 32:5.
42. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the "AriZal."
43. *Berachot* 7b.
44. *Midrash Tanchuma*, Ha'azinu, 7.
45. Rabbi Yehudah Hechasid, *Sefer Chassidim*, No. 460.
46. Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, *Collected Writing of Nachmanides*, Letter of Nachmanides to his son Rabbi Shlomo. Edited by Charles B. Chavel, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1986.
47. See chapters on Chanukah and Purim.
48. See chapter on Fast Days.

49. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, Orach Chaim 4:66.
50. For example, Maimonides' father who had the Spanish name Maimon.
51. Genesis 17:12.
52. Mishnah *Nedarim* 3:11; Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 31b-32a.
53. *Keritut* 9a.
54. Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Barcelona, *Sefer Hachinuch*, Mitzvah 3, *Parshat Lech Lecha*; Rabbi Menachem Recanati, *Taamei Hamitzvot*, Mitzvat Asei 75.
55. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, II Edoth, chap. 36, para. 263-265; Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:49.
56. *Horeb*, *ibid.*
57. Leviticus 12:3.
58. *Shabbat* 132a.
59. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings, 9:3.
60. Wednesday-> Thursday-> Friday-> SHABBAT <-Sunday <-Monday <-Tuesday
61. Maharal, *Chidushei Aggadot, Shabbat* 21b.
62. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:49.
63. Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn, *Bris Milah*, ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, NY, 1985 pp. 53-54.
64. *Ibid.*, pg. 99, para. 63-66.
65. *Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah*, 264:1, Ramah ad loc.
66. *Ibid.* 262:1, Ramah.
67. *Ibid.* 265:11.
68. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 210-211.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. Exodus Chaps. 11-12.
72. Meir Leibush Malbim, *Commentary on Exodus* 11:5.
73. Exodus 13:2.
74. Numbers 3:13.
75. Numbers 3:44-51; 8:15-18; 18:15-16.
76. *Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah* 305:1.
77. *Ibid.* 305; *Responsa Melamed Leho'il, Yoreh Deah* 100.
78. *Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah* 305:15.
79. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Numbers 18:15.
80. Heard from Rabbi Dovid Kaplan, a rabbi and *Kohen* in Jerusalem, with the experience of many Pidyon ceremonies.
81. *Ibid.* 305:10, Ramah ad loc.
82. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 218-221.
83. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 17:2, *Shaarei Teshuvah*, ad loc.
84. Leviticus 19:27.
85. See chapter on the Land of Israel.
86. Proverbs 3:18.
87. From the Ohr Somayach, "Ask the Rabbi" at www.ohr.edu. Based on *Responsa Arugat Habosem, Meam Loez* on Deuteronomy 11:19, *Sefer Hachinuch LeYisrael* p. 239. See also *Sefer Taamei Haminhagim, Inyanei Hilula DeRashbi* 6.
88. Mishnah, *Avot* [Ethics of the Fathers], 5:21; Mishnah, *Niddah* 5:6, 6:11; Talmud, *Nazir* 29b, Rashi ad loc. "VeReb Yosi" — The age of *bar/bat mitzvah* are of Biblical origin.; *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 55:9; 616:2, *Even Haezer* 167:3, *Choshen Mishpat* 35:1; *Mishnah Berurah*, 53:33, 55:42; *Kaf Hachaim*, 53:48.
89. *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Bo*, 14; *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 55:10.
90. Mishnah, *Kiddushin* 1:7; Rashi, *Chagigah* 2a "Eizehu katan"; *Nazir* 29b.
91. Mishnah, *Terumot* 1:3; Mishnah, *Niddah* 6:11; Rashi, *Yoma* 82a "mechanchin."
92. *Niddah* 30b; Maharal, *Chidushei Aggadot*, ad loc.; *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Pekudei*, 3; Rabbi Moshe Chaninah Neiman, *Shaarei Bar Mitzvah*, p. 9, Bnei Brak, 1996.

93. *Sanhedrin* 91b; *Piskei Tosafot, Nedarim* 62; *Avot D'Rebbi Natan*, 16:12.
94. *Nazir*, 62a-b; *Zohar* Vol. 1, p. 78b, *Sitrei Torah*; Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, *Yahel Ohr*, ad loc.
95. *Zohar* *ibid.*; *Shaarei Bar Mitzvah*, pp. 16-17.
96. *Shaarei Bar Mitzvah*, p. 29, foot-notes.
97. Rabbi Shlomo Luria, *Yam Shel Shlomoh, Bava Kamma*, Chap. 7, para. 37.
98. *Yam Shel Shlomoh*, *ibid.*; *Mishnah Berurah*, 225:6; *Bava Kamma* 87a.
99. Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, *Ben Ish Chai, Shana Rishonah, Parshat Re'eh*, 17.
100. *Mishnah Berurah*, 225:6.
101. Rabbi Yair Chaim Bachrach, *Responsa Chavot Yair*, 123.
102. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 1:104.
103. See chapter on Prayer.
104. *Shaarei Ephraim*, Shaar 4:25; *Chayei Adam*, 65:3; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 61:8; *Aruch Hashulchan* 225:4.
105. See chapter on Prayer.
106. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 142-143.
107. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, 63:10; *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim* 225:2 Ramah; *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 144-145.
108. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, VI, Avodah, Chap. 111, para. 681.
109. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 37:3, Ramah; *Mishnah Berurah* 12, *Biur Halachah* ad loc.; *Magen Avraham*, Orach Chaim, 37:14; *Aruch Hashulchan* 37:4; *Kaf Hachaim*, 37:14.
110. The Babylonian Talmud is the 21-volume edited version of the comments, discussion and arguments of the great Torah academies of Babylon over a period of approximately 200 years of study of the Mishnah. [See note 111.] There are 63 tractates, or subsections of the Talmud, called *masechtot* in Hebrew (singular, *masechet*). It was completed c.500 CE. It is written in Aramaic, and is also referred to as Gemara.
111. The Mishnah is the 6-volume summary of the Oral Tradition, edited c. 200 CE by Judah the Prince. It has 523 chapters. It is written in Hebrew and forms the basis of the Talmud.
112. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 4:23.
113. *Shaarei Bar Mitzvah*, p. 65.



Spiritual Survival: Chanukah

*The history and meaning of Chanukah,
the menorah, latkes and dreidels*

Setting the Scene

*I*srael: Approximately 200 years before the events of Chanukah, hundreds of thousands of Jews returned from the Babylonian exile to the Land of Israel. In time, they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem and established an independent Jewish monarchy.

Greece: After the death of Alexander the Great¹ in 323 B.C.E., the Greek-Macedonian Empire split into several smaller kingdoms: the Greek Empire based in Greece; the Seleucid Empire based in Syria; and the Ptolemaic Empire based in Egypt.

A Greek Tragedy

The Land of Israel was situated precisely between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms, both of which were Greek in language and culture. In the struggle for regional domination between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid

Empires, control of the trade routes and seaports of the Land of Israel became critical. Under Emperor Antiochus IV² of Syria, the Seleucids invaded Israel. Although they did not physically exile the Jewish people, they created a state of virtual exile in the Land of Israel.³ The Jews were subject to Greek rule and Judaism came under attack from every side.

The Hellenist Seleucids wanted to swallow the Jews culturally and turn Israel into a Greek vassal state. Although they did not destroy the Temple, they defiled it and turned it into a pagan Greek temple.⁴ Rather than merely disposing of the olive oil used to light the Temple Menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum), they dedicated it to their pagan gods.⁵ The Greeks were not interested in physically destroying the Jewish people; they wanted to destroy them spiritually. Therefore, instead of destroying the Jewish buildings they tried to obliterate the holiness of the sites. They issued decrees designed to undermine the most essential aspects of Jewish life: banning circumcision, the observance of Shabbat, the Jewish calendar⁶ and the study of Torah.⁷ Jewish brides were required to submit to the local Greek governor on their wedding night.⁸ The decrees against circumcision, Shabbat and the calendar were intended to break down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles. By banning Torah study and corrupting the Temple service they tried to sever the connection between the Jews and God. The decree concerning Jewish brides was an attempt to insinuate themselves into the most intimate and holy aspects of Jewish life, to destroy the genealogical chain of Judaism and the purity of Jewish family life and morality.⁹

The Revolt

The Greeks were very successful in their campaign against Judaism. Many Jews were quite content to be Greeks. They adopted Greek clothing, hairstyles and names. There were entire cities in Israel populated by Jews, which to all appearances were Greek cities.¹⁰ To these Jewish Hellenists, the Greeks represented all that was modern, new and scientific, while Judaism was antiquated and out of fashion. They accepted the Greek gods and participated in Greek festivals and athletic events. Many Jewish men who competed in these events, in which the athletes were naked, actually underwent operations in order to look uncircumcised.¹¹

Many Jews did remain loyal to Judaism, however, and continued to live as Jews, despite the pressure to assimilate and the great risks involved. A small group of these loyalists felt that they were morally obligated to fight the Greeks and to expel them from Israel. They believed that the Jewish people would only be free to live a full Jewish life if they were independent. The kernel of this group was a family of *Kohanim*, "Priests":¹² Mattathias (Matityahu) son of Yochanan the High Priest (*Kohen*

Gadol) and his five sons. Known as the Hasmoneans¹³ (*Chashmonaim*), they were led by their brother Judah (Yehudah) “the Maccabee.”¹⁴ Although from a military perspective their cause seemed hopeless, this small army began a guerilla war against the powerful and massive Greek occupying army.¹⁵

The Lights of Victory

Miraculously, their campaign was successful. The Maccabees defeated the Greek army and entered the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which had been defiled and tainted by idolatry. They wanted to light the Menorah and rededicate the Temple to God, but the Greeks had systematically broken the seals and desecrated every amphora of pure oil. They finally found a single jar of oil that still bore the seal of the High Priest, indicating its purity. It contained just enough oil to light the Menorah for one day, but miraculously the oil lasted for eight days. The miracle of the oil was understood as a sign from Heaven that the military victory was indeed brought about by Divine intervention, that the Maccabees had acted in accordance with God’s wishes, and that the Jewish people would survive and continue to bring the light of Torah to the world.

The following year, the Sanhedrin declared a new festival of gratitude and praise¹⁶ to God for the miracle of Jewish spiritual survival. Beginning on the 25th of Kislev, and lasting eight days, they called it Chanukah, meaning “dedication” (of the Temple). This festival commemorates the miracles of Chanukah for all time.

The Spiritual Battle

The underlying theme of the conflict between the Jews and the Greeks is the clash between two diametrically opposed worldviews. In the Jewish view of reality, everything in the physical world is a reflection of the spiritual. A physical conflict is a superficial manifestation of a deeper spiritual conflict. There are, of course, many points of contention between Jewish tradition and Greek philosophy. The spiritual essence of the Judeo-Greek conflict however, revolves around a single idea — the definition of reality. Nachmanides, one of the greatest Biblical commentators, encapsulates the difference as follows:

[Our belief is unlike] that Greek [Aristotle] who denied everything that he could not sense. He and his students were arrogant enough to think that anything that they did not arrive at with their own reasoning was not true.¹⁷

The essence of Jewish belief is that the senses perceive only the surface of an entity. Beneath this plane of physical perception lies a vast spiritual reality. For Jews, truth is not defined by the human being, but by God. Our system of ethics originates in the Revelation at Mt. Sinai, not in a social contract or human convenience. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once commented that there is no such thing as Jewish theology — for theology is the opinion of humans about God, but Judaism is God’s opinions about humanity: “Not what man thinks of God is of primary importance, but what God thinks of man and wants him to do.”¹⁸

The Greeks believed that their perception defined reality, ethics and truth. The most elegant, beautiful concept constitutes the truth. The Greek ideal of beauty, for example, was something that depended on very specific measurements in the facial structure of a person. The more acute the angle formed by the nose and forehead, the more ugly the individual; the more obtuse the angle, the more beautiful.¹⁹ Western society, the successor of Greek culture, exhibits this attitude in its language as well.

The English word “face” has its origins in the Latin “facies” which is related to “facade,” “surface” and “superficial.” In contrast, the Hebrew word for face is *panim*, which means “inside.” The most beautiful face is one that reveals inner beauty and meaning, not one with idealized angles and texture.²⁰

Maimonides points out another theme in the conflict. He maintains that the greatest mistake of Greek philosophy was the belief that matter is eternal and not created.²¹ Since in the Greek view God is within nature and not above it, He could not intervene to change nature. This view precludes the possibility of miracles, revelation and Divine Providence. It denies any ultimate purpose in existence. The events of Chanukah provided a dramatic refutation of this Greek worldview.

The Greek Melting Pot

The idea that any one people could be “chosen” or have a Divine revelation was completely contrary to Greek belief. Therefore, the Greek campaign against Judaism and the Jews attempted to eradicate the Jews as a special people. One example of this effort was the Emperor Ptolemy’s translation of the Torah into Greek. The Talmud²² relates that Ptolemy gathered 72 Sages, placed them in 72 separate cubicles and commanded them to translate the Five Books of Moses into Greek. Miraculously, they all translated the Torah in exactly the same way, and they all made the same thirteen changes from a literal translation in order to prevent the Greeks from misinterpreting the Torah.²³ Although this would appear to be a positive event, perhaps as a step toward disseminating the

ideas of monotheism and morality, the Jewish Sages looked upon it as a disaster.²⁴

They knew that the Torah never could be captured in translation. No language other than Hebrew can convey its depth, beauty, infinite layers and nuances.²⁵ Another tragic aspect of this event was that the Greeks would now present the Torah, the essence of the bond between the Jews and God, as public property to be accessed by anyone. They would argue that the Jewish people no longer had any claim to a “special relationship” with God, since anyone could take Judaism 101 at Athens U. and know Torah just as well. In truth, in order to properly understand Torah, one must have the Oral Torah²⁶ — which the Greeks did not have. The true Covenant between God and the Jewish people was manifested in the intimate and personal relationship of the Oral Tradition, even more than in the publicly available and accessible Written Torah.²⁷

Celebrate!

After millennia of attempts to assimilate us into our host cultures, whether through force or persuasion, we are still here. But it is not mere physical survival that we celebrate. After all, the genes of other ancient nations have also physically survived. The miracle of Jewish survival is that we have survived with our spiritual heritage intact.²⁸ When we light the Chanukah candles today we are extensions of the Maccabees, lighting the Menorah in the rededicated Second Temple. In effect, we are continuing the lighting of the Menorah by the Priests in the First and Second Temples. Ultimately, we are even continuing the lighting of the first Menorah in the Sinai Tabernacle by Aaron the High Priest, brother of Moses.²⁹

The lights of Chanukah are also a potent reminder that physical might and numbers do not necessarily prevail. As the prophet Zechariah stated, “Not by might, not by power, but by My spirit, said the Lord of Hosts.”³⁰ The miracle of Chanukah was the victory in which God delivered “... the powerful into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the evil into the hands of the righteous and the violent into the hands of the those who are devoted to the Torah.”³¹

Oh Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel!

A traditional pastime on Chanukah is playing with a *dreidel*, a four-sided spinning top with a Hebrew letter on each side. The Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *heh* and *shin* begin the words in the Hebrew sentence

“A great miracle happened there.” (In Israel, the letter *peh* is inscribed instead of a *shin* to correspond to the sentence, “A great miracle happened *here*.”) Children play a game in which candies or coins are won or lost depending upon which letter is up after the dreidel has stopped spinning and falls.

Playing *dreidel* is more than just a bit of holiday fun, however. It teaches us a profound lesson about Jewish history. It symbolizes the four major exiles that the Jews have experienced: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome.³² Just like a spinning *dreidel*, each of these empires has its moment in the sun but will eventually fall. In history, as with the *dreidel*, only two things remain constant: the point on which it revolves and the handle above. The point around which the *dreidel* revolves symbolizes the eternal Jewish people, while the “hand” from above which spins the *dreidel* of history is the Divine Providence of God.³³

As in almost all Jewish festivals, food plays a role in the celebration. On Chanukah it is customary to eat dairy foods to remind us of the heroism of Judith (Yehudit), daughter of Yochanan the High Priest. When she was taken to be defiled by the Greek ruler Holofernes, she served him cheese, to make him thirsty, and wine, to quench his thirst. After getting Holofernes completely drunk, she decapitated him. (This was illegal in Greece at the time.)

This was one of the events that sparked the Maccabean uprising.³⁴ The other, and perhaps more well-known, event occurred in Modi'in, home of the Maccabees. A Jewish Hellenist attempted to publicly offer a pig as a sacrifice to a pagan idol. When Mattathias attacked him, Greek troops intervened, thus starting a battle between the Maccabees and the Greeks.

Food fried in oil is also eaten to commemorate the miracle of the Menorah. Latkes, which are fried pancakes made of grated potato, grated onion and eggs are usually eaten with applesauce (or sour cream, for the brave of heart). In Israel, deep-fried jelly donuts, called *sufganiyot*, are the quintessential Chanukah delicacies.

The Levy Family Lights Up

On the day before Chanukah, Mr. Levy sets up a sturdy shelf near the front window that will be big enough to accommodate all the family's menorahs. The largest menorah is an heirloom, inherited from Mrs. Levy's grandfather. It is sterling silver and has oil containers in the shape of lions with wicks coming out of their mouths. The lions are lined up in front of a wall that is made to look like the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It has a small pitcher to fill the cups with olive oil and a silver holder for the shamash, the candle

used to light the menorah. Some of the children have simple oil-burning menorahs. Those who are too young for oil menorahs have a menorah that uses candles. Mr. and Mrs. Levy help the smaller children light, and it is always a big event for the child to graduate to lighting by himself or herself. Eventually each receives his or her very own oil menorah.

As soon as Mr. Levy arrives home from the evening service, the family gathers at the window to light the Chanukah candles. First Mr. Levy recites the blessings and lights the large family menorah, then each of the children lights his or her own menorah. After the lighting, the family sings the traditional song, Maoz Tzur. Mrs. Levy always prepares a dairy treat for Chanukah (a favorite is fudge), which she gives out to the children after the candle lighting. The children then play dreidel until suppertime. Mr. Levy usually studies some Torah with each of the children while the candles are burning, and treats them to his specialty, latkes and applesauce, afterward.

The Levys give their children Chanukah gelt (money) every night of Chanukah. One of the reasons for this custom is based on the law that everyone, no matter how poor, must light Chanukah candles, even if it means begging.³⁵ Since there were often people begging for charity on Chanukah, it became a custom to give gifts of money on Chanukah so that the poor and needy would not be embarrassed.³⁶

Shlomo is away at yeshivah for Chanukah, and he lights his own menorah in the dining room of the yeshivah. From the street, one can see about 150 menorahs crowded together on tables near the windows of the yeshivah. On any given night of Chanukah, the students will be attending parties at the homes of their teachers. Like most students, Shlomo will go home for the Shabbat of Chanukah.

On one night of Chanukah, the Levys always get together with cousins and grandparents for a special evening of conversation, songs and games. They try to plan a few family outings on Chanukah as well. This year, the highlighted trip is to the new aquarium, followed by dinner at a kosher restaurant. The community is organizing a concert of Jewish music on Chanukah, and the local Jewish bookstore has a sale. The synagogue that the Levys attend always brings in a famous rabbi to give a lecture for the community one night of Chanukah, and hires a storyteller to entertain the children during the lecture. Although every holiday is special, the Levy children look forward all year to the special activities and relaxed pace of Chanukah.

Selected Laws of Chanukah

1. Chanukah begins on the evening of the 25th of Kislev (usually December) and continues for eight days.³⁷
2. Because of the fact that the dedication of the Temple and Altar took place during Chanukah,³⁸ it is customary to celebrate by eating special meals, although there is no obligation to do so. During the meal we sing Jewish songs and speak about Torah, in order to make it a *seudat mitzvah*, a meal of religious significance.³⁹ One should not fast during Chanukah, even on the occasion of a parent's *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death, when there is a custom to fast).⁴⁰
3. There is no prohibition of work on Chanukah. It is customary, however, for women not to work for the first half-hour, at least, after lighting the candles. Some have the custom not to work as long as the candles are still burning. The prohibition includes activities such as sewing and laundry, but cooking is permitted.⁴¹
4. Every household should light at least one candle each night of Chanukah. The universal custom, however, is to follow the preferred method of adding an additional candle each night. Thus, on the first night one candle is lit, two on the second night and so on. Some families have a *chanukiah* (also popularly known as a menorah) for every adult in the house⁴² and many people have one for every child (of appropriate age) to light.
5. Any type of oil is acceptable for use in the menorah; however, it is best to use olive oil as was done in the Temple.⁴³ Wax candles are also acceptable. Since the menorah should be similar to the Menorah in the Temple, electric lights are not acceptable.⁴⁴ It is appropriate to use a beautiful menorah.⁴⁵
6. Note that because the purpose of lighting Chanukah candles is to publicize the miracles of Chanukah, many of the laws related to this *mitzvah* are meant to maximize this effect. Ideally, the menorah should be placed outside the house to the left of the entrance. Since anti-Semitism was so common throughout Jewish history, it became customary among many communities to place the menorah inside the house, near the entrance. It is common practice to place the menorah in a window facing the public, especially where many people share one entrance (e.g., apartment buildings).⁴⁶

7. The menorah should be easily visible; therefore it should be no lower than 10.5 inches (27cm) and no higher than 35.5 ft (10.8m) from ground level. Ideally, it should be placed at a height of about 35 inches (90cm).⁴⁷
8. One should not “benefit” from the light of the menorah (e.g., use it as a light source for reading or other activities), just as it was forbidden to derive benefit from the Menorah in the Temple. This also demonstrates that the purpose of the menorah is to fulfill a *mitzvah*, not merely for illumination.⁴⁸
9. All the candles or wicks on the menorah should be on the same level, none higher or lower than the others. A separate candle known as the *shamash* is used to light the rest of the candles. The *shamash* should be placed in a way that shows that it is not one of the Chanukah candles (e.g., on the side, above or below the others).⁴⁹
10. On the first night of Chanukah a single candle is lit on the extreme right of the menorah. On the second night, a second candle is added immediately to the left of the first, and so on. The newest candle is lit first each night, continuing on to the right.⁵⁰
11. There are different customs regarding the time of candle lighting. Some communities light at sunset, some light about 10 minutes after sunset and some light about a half-hour after sunset (at nightfall). Others light immediately after the evening service (*Maariv*) is recited. Ideally a person should follow the custom of his father’s family. If this is not known or is inapplicable for any reason, one should follow the custom of the local community.⁵¹
12. If one forgot or was not able to light at the correct time, one may light, with a blessing, as long as people are still awake in the house.⁵²
13. One should place enough oil or a large enough candle in the menorah to last at least a half-hour after nightfall (i.e., until the appearance of three stars).⁵³
14. On the first night, three blessings (*berachot*) are recited: “*Lehadlik ner shel Chanukah*,” “*She’asah nissim*” and “*Shehecheyanu*.” On the other nights, only the first two blessings are recited. One should not speak between recitation of the blessings and the completion of candle lighting. After lighting, “*Hanerot Hallalu*” and “*Maoz Tzur*” are sung. For the full text and translation of the

blessings and these hymns, see *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 782-785.⁵⁴

15. On Friday night, the Chanukah candles should be lit before the Shabbat candles, since once Shabbat has been accepted it is forbidden to light Chanukah candles. The afternoon service, *Minchah*, should be recited, if possible, before lighting.⁵⁵ After Shabbat, one should first recite *Havdalah*,⁵⁶ and then light the Chanukah candles. One should not use the menorah as the candle for *Havdalah*.⁵⁷
16. One must put in more oil or use larger candles on Friday, so that they burn until a half-hour after nightfall. The menorah is lit just before the Shabbat candles, taking care not to delay lighting the Shabbat candles beyond the appropriate time.⁵⁸
17. During morning prayers, *Shacharit*, the full *Hallel* is recited every day of Chanukah.⁵⁹
18. *Al Hanissim*, a special paragraph of prayers for Chanukah, is added in the silent prayer (*Shemoneh Esreh*) and also in Grace After Meals. If one forgot to say *Al Hanissim*, one should not repeat either *Shemoneh Esreh* or Grace After Meals.⁶⁰

For Further Reading

- ▶ *Chanukah: Its History, Observance, and Significance* (ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1986)
- ▶ *Living Beyond Time: The Mystery and Meaning of the Jewish Festivals* by Rabbi Pinchas Stolper (Shaar Press, 2003)
- ▶ *The Jewish Self* by Rabbi Jeremy Kagan (Feldheim, 1998)

NOTES

References to books of the Talmud refer to the Babylonian Talmud unless otherwise noted.

1. Also known as Alexander of Macedon.
2. Also known as Antiochus Epiphanes (“The Illustrious”), circa 215-164 B.C.E.
3. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 2:4.
4. Ibid. *Shabbat* 21b; *Avodah Zarah* 52b.
5. Ibid. *Shabbat*.
6. *Otzar Midrashim*, Chanukah, 4:10.
7. *Midrash Tanchuma*, Deuteronomy, *Ki Tavo* 2.
8. *Ketuvot* 3b.
9. Maharal of Prague, *Ner Mitzvah* — Introduction.
10. Josephus Flavius, Antiquities, from *The Complete Works of Josephus Flavius*, Bigelow, Brown and Co., NY.
11. Ibid. Josephus; Jerusalem Talmud, *Yevamot* 8:1 (45a).
12. *Kohanim*, descendants of Aaron the High Priest, brother of Moses.
13. The word means “important.” *Siddur Otzar Hatefillot, Eitz Yosef* and *Iyun Tefillah*, commentary on “Al Hanissim.”
14. **Maccabee** is a Hebrew acronym for the verse in Exodus 15:11: “Who is like You among the heavenly powers, God!”
15. General Sir Richard Gale, *Great Battles of Biblical History*, Hutchinson, London, 1968, Chaps. 15 and 16.
16. Ibid. *Shabbat*.
17. Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Leviticus 16:8 (end of paragraph).
18. Cited by Dayan I. Grunfield, Introduction to *Horeb*, Soncino Press, London, 1962, p. xxxviii.
19. Stephen Jay Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus*, Norton Paperback, NY, 1992, Chap. 15.
20. Quoted from Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner.
21. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 2:25.
22. *Megillah* 9a.
23. Mishnah *Sofrim* 1:8.
24. Ibid. 1:7.
25. Ibid.
26. See the chapter on The Oral Torah.
27. *Gittin* 60b; *Responsa Beit Halevi*, Drush 18.
28. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, II Edoth, Chap. 34, par. 247.
29. Nachmanides, Commentary on Numbers 8:2.
30. Zechariah 4:6.
31. Liturgy — Prayer inserted into Silent Prayer on Chanukah, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 118-119.
32. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 1.
33. *Bnei Yisasschar*, Kislev/Tevet, Essay 2:25.
34. *Otzar Midrashim*, Chanukah, par. 18; *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 670:2, Ramah.
35. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 671:1.
36. Heard from Rabbi David Cohen.
37. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 670:1.
38. Ibid. *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc.
39. Ibid. 670:2, Ramah.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid. 670:1, *Mishnah Berurah*.
42. Ibid. 671:1.
43. Ibid. 671:2.
44. *Kaf Hachaim*, Hilchot Chanukah 673:19; *Levushei Mordechai, Orach Chaim*, 59; *Meorai Aish*, 5:2; *Responsa Beit Yitzchak, Yoreh Deah* 1:120:5; *Responsa Har Zvi, Orach Chaim*, 2:114:2; *Yabia Omer* 3:35.
45. *Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim*, 673:1.
46. Ibid. 671:5-7.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.

49. Ibid. 673:1.
50. Ibid. 676:5.
51. Ibid. 672.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid. 676.
55. Ibid. 679:1.
56. Prayer signifying the termination of Shabbat. See chapter on Shabbat.
57. Ibid. 681:1-2.
58. Ibid.
59. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz*, pp. 632-643.
60. Ibid. pp. 114-115.