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# Vayeshev 5783: This Calls for a Celebration!

December 11, 2022 9 min read



## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

by Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

### Vayeshev (Genesis 37-40)

**GOOD MORNING!** This upcoming Sunday night, December 18<sup>th</sup>, the holiday of Hanukkah begins. I have found it particularly fascinating that, after the Passover Seder, the holiday of Hanukkah is the second most widely observed Jewish holiday. To many, Hanukkah is just a Jewish version of Christmas. I have heard countless parents say some version of the following to their children: “No honey, we don’t celebrate Christmas – we’re Jewish and we have Hanukah.”

**In many ways**, the Greeks of antiquity were a very open-minded society and their goal was to integrate everyone into it. In order to achieve this, they demanded that everyone conform to their vision. They used both guile and violence to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, for the Jewish nation this meant abandoning Judaism, the Torah, and everything that they stood for. Sadly, many Jews became “Hellenized” and

surrendered the religion of their forebears.

**Thus**, the story of Hanukkah celebrates those who maintained their Judaism and the triumph of the holy Torah and its ideals over paganism and secularism. I have often wondered if those who celebrate Hanukkah today would have actually chosen Judaism and a Torah way of life had they lived some 2,300 years ago.

**In addition**, Hanukkah has a particularly unique aspect to it – one that is not found anywhere else in Judaism – and the lesson it teaches us can be truly life changing. But first a little historical background:

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### **Q & A: WHAT IS HANUKAH AND HOW DO WE CELEBRATE IT?**

**In 167 BCE**, the Syrian-Greek and Hellenistic emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, set out to destroy Judaism and incorporate the Land of Israel and its inhabitants into his empire. His soldiers descended upon Jerusalem, massacring thousands of people and defiling the city's holy Second Temple with idol worship by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls.

**However**, the evil Antiochus knew that a mere physical attack on the Jews would not accomplish his goal. He therefore mounted an attack on the very structure of Judaism. First, he prohibited studying and teaching the Torah. By prohibiting the study of Torah he was attempting to eliminate the spiritual backbone of the Jewish people.

**He then** issued a ban prohibiting the practice of three *mitzvot* (commandments): 1) Shabbat observance 2) Sanctifying of the new month (establishing the first day of the month by testimony of witnesses who saw the new moon) 3) *brit mila* (entering the Covenant of Abraham through Torah-ordained circumcision).

**Why** these three *mitzvot*? Shabbat signifies that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe and that His Torah is the blueprint of creation, imbuing the world with meaning and values. Sanctifying the new month determines the monthly calendar and the exact days of the Jewish holidays. Without a functioning calendar there would be communal chaos. *Brit mila* (circumcision) is a sign of our special covenant with the Almighty. These three *mitzvot* form a foundation for the structure of Judaism. Without them our cultural integrity would quickly deteriorate and dissolve, and we would slowly assimilate and submit to the Greek culture.

**A family** of Jewish priests – Matityahu and his five sons, known as the Maccabees – would not have it. They started a revolt and three years later succeeded in evicting the oppressors. The victory was a true miracle – on the scale of present day Israel being able to defeat the combined forces of all of today's super-powers (this might also explain why the emblem of the State of Israel is a menorah). Once the Jewish people regained control of the Temple in Jerusalem, they wanted to rededicate it immediately. The symbol of this rededication was to be the lighting of the menorah on the newly recaptured Temple Mount.

**In order** to do so, they needed ritually pure olive oil to re-light the menorah in the Temple, which was a part of the Temple's nightly service. Only a single cruse of oil

was found. This was just enough to burn for one day, however, they needed oil for eight days (the time it would take for new ritually pure olive oil to be produced). A miracle occurred and the single small jar of oil burned for eight days. Thus, the Temple was rededicated; in fact, Hanukah means “dedication” in Hebrew!

**To commemorate** the miracle, we light Hanukah candles (or better yet, lamps with olive oil) for eight nights. The first candle is placed on the far right of the menorah with each additional night’s candle being placed to the immediate left. One says three blessings the first night (only two blessings each subsequent night) and then lights the candles, starting with the furthestmost candle to the left (the newest addition). We light the candles near a window or in our doorways so that others may see them, in order to publicize the miracles that occurred on Hanukah.

**It is** here that we find a remarkable aspect of Hanukah within Jewish law. Anyone even slightly familiar with Jewish practices is aware that one of the most practiced customs is that of reciting blessings. We recite blessings on every commandment that we fulfill, when we partake of food and drink, and when we have certain life experiences (e.g. meeting a king or seeing a place where miracles have occurred).

**One** of the more unique aspects of Hanukah has to do with a very unusual law: the great medieval codifier of Jewish law known as Maimonides rules that on Hanukah a person lighting candles on the first night of Hanukah makes three blessings: 1) “*lehadlik ner*” – for fulfilling the rabbinic commandment to light 2) “*she’aso nissim*” – thanking the Almighty for the miracles of Hanukah and 3) “*shehechayanu*” – thanking the Almighty for the opportunity (the third is only recited on the first night).

**Regarding** this we find a most unusual law – Maimonides writes that a person who hasn’t yet lit his own candles can actually recite the second and third blessings upon seeing another person lighting their menorah. In other words, you make a

blessing on another person's act of fulfilling the *mitzvah*! This is a rather strange law and one that isn't found anywhere else. What is it about Hanukah that creates this opportunity?

**In order** to understand this, we must begin to appreciate the very essence of what the holiday of Hanukah is all about. Hanukah, as we know, celebrates the victory over the Greeks who tried to eradicate the study of Torah and its values. One of the greatest differences between Greek culture and Jewish culture is how we view our relationships with others.

**One** of the defining elements of the Hellenistic culture was that of athletic matches. This is very clearly highlighted by the value that the ancient Greeks placed on competition. In fact, perhaps the most enduring legacy that Greek culture has left the world is the Olympics and athletic competitions. Thus, the Greeks defined personal excellence by what they achieved in comparison to others.

**The jargon** of competition is so ubiquitous in our lives that we hardly notice how violent the descriptions are. One team "beat" the other. The word "beat" can easily be substituted with the words "slaughtered," "killed," "destroyed," etc. This kind of attitude defines measuring one's achievements not only by what you have accomplished but also through the demoralization of your opponent.

**Of course**, this is rather unfair as everyone was created with different strengths and weaknesses. It is for this reason that Judaism doesn't believe in judging oneself in comparison to others. The only acceptable competition is challenging oneself to strive and achieve ever greater accomplishments.

**When** my father founded a day school in Miami Beach in the 1980's, he emphasized that the prime educational goal was to motivate each child to develop to the best of their capabilities. He discouraged school wide competitions in the lower grades and mandated that the teachers and administrators grade each child by their achievements through personal effort and hard work.

**Grades** were not to be given objectively, but rather subjectively. A high grade should only be given based on how much a student achieved through personal effort. That is, a student who can easily memorize material should not be granted an “A” for effortlessly recalling what others have to spend many hours studying. He challenged his educational staff to make sure that every student was being challenged according to their capabilities and to grade them on that basis.

**Likewise**, Judaism celebrates personal achievement as measured by one’s own innate capabilities. This has another amazing benefit: We can celebrate other people’s successes as well as our own because their achievements do not come at our expense. Thus, we are not resentful of what they have attained and we can be genuinely happy for what they have accomplished.

**That is** why on Hanukah, when we are celebrating the triumph of Judaism over Greek culture, we make a point to make a blessing when we see others fulfilling the *mitzvah* of lighting candles. We are internalizing the message that we are happy for another person’s achievements. I want to wish everyone a most joyous Hanukah and may the lights of this holiday usher in an extended era of peace and tranquility. Amen.



## TORAH PORTION OF THE WEEK

### **Vayeshev, Genesis 37:1 – 40:23**

**This week's** portion includes four stories: 1) The selling of Joseph (Yosef) as a slave by his brothers, which eventually positioned Joseph to be second in command in Egypt and enabled him to save the known world from famine 2) The indiscretion of Judah (Yehuda) with Tamar 3) The attempted seduction of Joseph by Potifar’s wife, which ends with her framing Joseph and having him imprisoned 4) Joseph interpreting the dreams of his fellow prisoners, the wine steward (who was reinstated

and forgot to put in a good word for Joseph) and the baker (who was hanged).

## Candle Lighting Times



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### Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig, author of *Shabbat Shalom Weekly*, *Shabbat Shalom Fax of Life*, is President/CEO of Talmudic University, the umbrella organization for a consortium of accredited schools ranging from pre-school through college and graduate school. The schools and their educational programs are located on three campuses in S. Florida and one in central Pennsylvania and are significant presences in the Jewish community.

Rabbi Zweig has developed many programs and initiatives to help strengthen the local South Florida Jewish community including the Miami Kosher Ko-Op; free of charge bereavement service; a free loan society for short term loans to needy individuals; two hospitality suites for families with members in the local hospitals; and several other community programs.

Shabbat Shalom Weekly, the Shabbat Fax of Life, is a weekly inspirational religious



newsletter that is read by hundreds of thousands of readers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, worldwide every week. The Shabbat Shalom Weekly provides insights into personal growth, information on Jewish holidays, social commentary from a Torah perspective, and includes lessons from the weekly Torah portion and is available in English, and Spanish.

Rabbi Zweig has served and continues to serve on many local boards as well, and currently serves as a chaplain for the Miami Beach Fire Department.

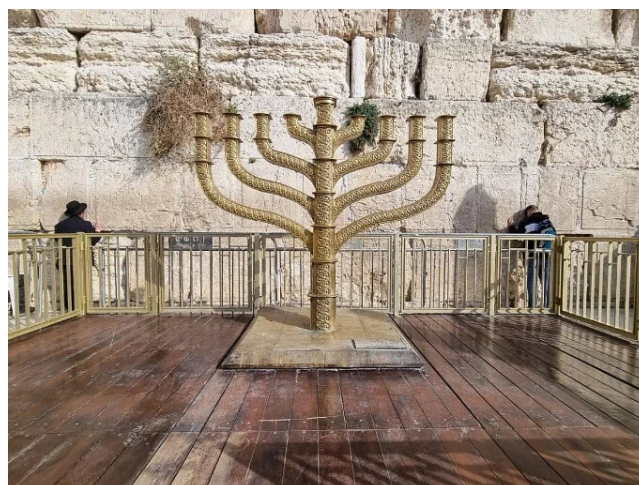
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A promotional graphic for Aish's Hanukkah campaign. The background is a vibrant teal color with a subtle geometric pattern. At the top center, the 'aish' logo is displayed in white. Below it, the text 'BECOME A MACCABEE' is written in large, bold, white capital letters. Underneath that, 'JOIN OUR HANUKKAH CAMPAIGN' is written in smaller, bold, black capital letters. A prominent orange rounded rectangle contains the text 'ALL DONATIONS MATCHED' in white capital letters. In the lower right, a smiling man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a red t-shirt with a cartoon character, holds a lit golden menorah. The menorah has nine lit candles, and several yellow stars are scattered around it. The man is pointing towards the menorah with his right hand.

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