

We often need to experience the extraordinary in order
to reawaken us to the significance of the ordinary.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz



Miracles



What's in a miracle

Miracles as Signs and Wonders

Who Needs Miracles?

The PJ Library: Hanukkah Lights



What's in a Miracle?

Nidah 31a

Rav Yosef expounded: What is the meaning of the verse, “I give thanks to You O Lord though you were harsh with me; Your wrath has turned back and You comfort me,” (Isaiah 12:1). To what is the verse referring? It is referring to two people who left home on a business trip. One of them got stuck with a thorn, and as a result could not continue on the journey. As soon as his friend left, the injured party started to curse his bad luck. A few days later he heard that his friend’s boat had sunk, and he had been saved because of the “cursed” thorn. He began to express gratitude and praise for the small pain that the thorn had caused him. Thus it is written: “Your wrath has turned back and You comfort me.” Just as Rabbi Elazar said: “What is the meaning of: ‘Blessed be the Lord God, God of Israel who makes miracles alone? And blessed be His as Rabbi Elazar said: Glorious Name forever?’” (Psalms 72:18-19)—Even the one who is granted the miracle is unaware of it!

Nidah Navigator

➤ In interpreting a verse from Isaiah, this Talmudic passage defines personal miracles. How does this parable interpret the verse in Isaiah?

Ta’anit 23a-b

Abba Hilkiyah was a grandson of Honi the Circle-Drawer, and whenever the world was in need of rain the Rabbis sent a message to him and he prayed and rain fell. Once there was an urgent need for rain and the Rabbis sent to him a couple of scholars [to ask him] to pray for rain...He said to his wife, “I know the scholars have come on account of rain. Let us go up to the roof and pray; perhaps the Holy One, Blessed be He, will have mercy and rain will fall, without having credit given to us.” They went up to the roof; he stood in one corner and she in another; at first the clouds appeared over the corner where his wife stood. When he came down he said to the scholars, “Why have you scholars come here?” They replied: “The Rabbis have sent us to you, Sir, [to ask you] to pray for rain.” Thereupon he exclaimed, “Blessed be God, who has made you no longer dependent on Abba Hilkiyah.” They replied: “We know that the rain has come on your account, but tell us, Sir, the meaning of these mysterious acts of yours, which are bewildering to us.... Why, Sir, did the clouds appear first in the corner where your wife stood and then in your corner?” [He replied]: “Because a wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor that they can at once enjoy while I give them money which they cannot at once enjoy. Or perhaps it may have to do with certain robbers in our neighborhood; I prayed that they might die, but she prayed that they might repent [and they did].”

Nedarim 41a

Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba: How much greater the miracle that is made for one who is ill than the miracle performed for Hanania, Mishael and Azariah (who were saved from the fiery furnace). For in their miracle they were saved from the fire of a mortal that anyone is capable of extinguishing. A sick person, however, when one has a fever that is considered heat that comes from heaven; who can extinguish that?

Nedarim Navigator

Miracles are often associated with pyrotechnics and the supernatural. The Talmudic passage above offers a different perspective.

- Why is the miracle of a broken fever greater than that of the salvation of three people from a fiery furnace?
- Why does the Talmud need to make this point?
- What is the most important component of a miracle if the supernatural is taken out of the picture?

Ta’anit Navigator

- Why did the rains come in this passage?
- Is it a coincidental or a miraculous happening?

What's in a Miracle?

Brachot 54a

If one sees a place where miracles have been wrought for Israel, he should say, “Blessed be He who wrought miracles for our ancestors in this place...”

From where is this rule derived? Rabbi Yochanan said: “Because Scripture says, ‘And Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you,’ etc.” (Exodus 18:10).

And is a blessing said only for a miracle that is performed for a large group, but not for an individual?

What of the case of the man who was once traveling through Eber Yemina when a lion attacked him, but he was miraculously saved, and when he came before Raba, Raba said to him, “Whenever you pass that place say, “Blessed be He who wrought for me a miracle in this place.”

There was the case, too, of Mar the son of Rabina who was once going through the valley of Araboth and was suffering from thirst and a well of water was miraculously created for him and he drank.

Another time he was going through the marketplace of Mahoza when a wild camel attacked him and at that moment the wall of a house at that place caved in and he escaped inside.

After that, whenever he came to Araboth he used to say, “Blessed be He who wrought for me miracles in Araboth [because the well was provided for him], and when he passed through the marketplace of Mahoza he would say, “Blessed be He who wrought for me miracles with a camel and in Araboth.”

The answer [is that] for a miracle done to a large group, it is the duty of everyone to say a blessing. For a miracle done to an individual, he alone is required to say a blessing.

Brachot Navigator

- What is the purpose of acknowledging personal miracles at the exact place instead of on the anniversary of the event?
- Why do we acknowledge collective miracles, even if we did not personally experience them?
- What is the one thing that all miracles have in common?

Additional Questions for Discussion

The following are general questions that can be used to trigger discussion among yourselves, either with a chevruta (study partner) or in a larger group.

1. What gives an event the status of a miracle? For instance, the receiving of the Torah is a momentous occasion, but would you consider it a miracle?
2. On the previous page Abba Hilkiyah is able to make it rain, something the entire community requires. The Talmud in Nidah recounts the miracle of literally “missing the boat.” The Talmud in Nedarim speaks of the miracle of healing from sickness. Why are these all considered miracles?
3. Can you come up with a broad definition of when something should be considered miraculous?
4. According to Talmudic definitions, are miracles part of present-day reality, and why?
5. Given the material we have learned, miracles can be reduced to the point where they are part of the banalities of everyday life. Alternatively, they can be so rarefied that they are considered mythical and not something that is now part of human experience. The words from the Talmud were written over fifteen hundred years ago. Has science challenged the notion of the miraculous in a world of reason?
6. Have you had personal experiences that would fit the Talmudic definition of “miraculous”? Please describe.

What's in a Miracle?

Hebrew Sources

מסופר: אבא חלקיה בר בריה [בן בנו] של חוני המעגל הוה [היה], וכי מצטרף עלמא למיטרא הוה משדרי רבנן לגביה, ובעי רחמי, ואתי מיטרא [וכאשר היה צריך העולם לגשם היו שולחים חכמים אליו, והיה מבקש רחמים, ובא הגשם]. זימנא חדא איצטרף עלמא למיטרא [פעם אחת הצטרף העולם לגשם], שדור רבנן זוגא דרבנן לגביה למבעי רחמי דניתי מיטרא [שלחו חכמים זוג חכמים אליו לבקש רחמים שיבא גשם]... אמר לה לדביתהו [לאשתו]: ידענא דרבנן משום מיטרא קא אתו [יודע אני שהחכמים משום הגשם באו], ניסק לאיגרא וניבעי רחמי [נעלה לגג ונבקש רחמים], אפשר דמרצי [אולי יתרצה] הקדוש ברוך הוא וייתי מיטרא ולא נחזיק טיבותא לנפשין [ויביא מטר, ולא נחזיק טובה לנפשנו], שלא יראה שאנחנו שגרמנו לכך. סקו לאיגרא, קם איהו בהדא זיתא, ואיהי בחדא זיתא [עלו לגג, עמד הוא בפינה זו והיא בפינה אחת, אחרת], קדים סלוק ענני מהך זיתא דביתהו [קדמו ועלו עננים מאותה פינה שעמדה בה אשתו]. כי נחית [כאשר ירד] אמר להו [להם]: אמאי אתו רבנן [מדוע באו חכמים] אלי? אמרו ליה [לו]: שדרי לן רבנן לגבי דמר למיבעי רחמי אמיתרא [שלחו אותנו חכמים אל אדוני לבקש רחמים על הגשם]. אמר להו [להם]: ברוך המקום שלא הצריך אתכם לאבא חלקיה שהרי השמים כבר מעוננים ועומד לרדת הגשם. אמרו ליה [לו]: ידעינן דמיטרא [יודעים אנו שהגשם] מחמת מר [אדוני] הוא דאתא [שבא], אלא לימא לן מר הני מילי דתמיהא לן [שיאמר, יסביר, לנו אדוני אותם הדברים שהיו תמוהים לנו] שעשית במשך הזמן... ומאי טעמא קדים סלוק ענני מהך זיתא דהוות קיימא דביתהו דמר לעננא דידיה [מה הטעם קדמו ועלו עננים מאותה זית שהיתה עומדת אשתו של אדוני לענן שלו]? אמר להם: משום דאיתתא שכיחא בביתא, ויהבא ריפתא לעניי, ומקרבא הנייתה [שהאשה נמצאת בבית, ונותנת לחם לעניים, וקרובה הנאתה] שהיא גורמת להם, ומידה כנגד מידה תפילתה נענית תחילה. ואנא יהיבנא זוזא ולא מקרבא הנייתה [ואני נותן לעניים מעות ואין הנאה זו קרובה], שהרי העני אינו נהנה מיד, אלא עד שיקנה לחם במעות אלה.

תענית כג, א-ב מהדורת שטיינזלץ

וְאָמַר ר' אֶלְפִּינְדִּירִי אָמַר ר' חֲזִיָּא בַּר אַבָּא: גְּדוֹל נִסְ שְׁנַעְשָׂה לְחוֹלָהּ יוֹתֵר מִן הַנִּסְ שְׁנַעְשָׂה לְחַנְנִיָּה מִשְׁאֵל וְעֲזָרָה שֶׁנִּיצְלוּ מִכַּבְּשֵׁן הָאֵשׁ. שֶׁבִּנְסָ שָׁל חַנְנִיָּה מִשְׁאֵל וְעֲזָרָה הֵם נִיצְלוּ מֵאֵשׁ שֶׁל הֶדְיוֹט, וְאֵשׁ זוּ הַכֹּל יְכוּלִים לְכַבּוֹתָהּ. וְזוּ שָׁל חוֹלָהּ שְׁאוּחֹזֵת בּוֹ הַקְּדוּחַת, הַחוּם אֵשׁ שֶׁל שָׁמַיִם הִיא, וּמִי יְכוּל לְכַבּוֹתָהּ?

נדרים מא, א מהדורת שטיינזלץ

דרש רב יוסף: מאי דכתיב [מה פירוש הנאמר] "ואמרת ביום ההוא אוֹדֵךְ ה' כִּי אֲנַפְתָּ בִּי יֵשׁוּב אִפְךָ וְתִנְחַמְנִי" (ישעיהו יב, א), במה הכתוב מדבר? – בשני בני אדם שיצאו ממקומם לסחורה, ישב לו קוץ לאחד מהן בגופו, וכתוצאה מכך לא יכול היה לצאת, בעוד שחברו יצא התחיל זה שנתחב בו הקוץ מחרף ומגדף על שארע לו כך. לימים שמע שטבעה ספינתו של חברו בים, ונמצא איפוא שבזכות אותו קוץ ניצל ממוות, התחיל מודה ("ואמרת ביום ההוא אוֹדֵךְ ה'") ומשבח על הצער המועט שנגרם לו על ידי אותו קוץ ("כי אנפת בי"). לכך נאמר: "ישׁוּב אִפְךָ וְתִנְחַמְנִי". והיינו [זוהו] שאמר רבי אלעזר: מאי דכתיב [מה פירוש הנאמר] "ברוך ה' אלקים אלקי ישראל עושה נפלאות (גדולות) לבדו. וברוך שם כבודו לעולם (תהלים עב, יח-יט) – אפילו בעל (זה שנעשה לו) הנס אינו מכיר בנסו ("עושה נפלאות לבדו").

נדה לא, א מהדורת שטיינזלץ

What's in a Miracle?

Hebrew Sources

משנה הרואה מקום שנעשו בו נסים לישראל, אומר: "ברוך... שעשה נסים לאבותינו במקום הזה"...

גמרא בענין חובת הברכה על הנס שואלים: מנא הני מילי [מנין הדברים הללו] נלמדים? אמר ר' יוחנן, שאמר קרא [הכתוב]: "ויאמר יתרו ברוך ה' אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים" (שמות יח, י), הרי שמברכים על הנס. ושואלים: אניסא [על נס] של רבים מברכינן [מברכים אנו] ואילו אניסא [על נס] של יחיד לא מברכינן [מברכים אנו]?! והא ההוא גברא דהוה קא אזיל [והרי אותו אדם שהיה הולך] בעבר ימינא [בצד ימין] של נהר פרת, נפל עליה אריא, אתעביד ליה ניסא, ואיתצל מיניה [והתנפל עליו אריה, נעשה לו נס וניצל ממנו]. אתא לקמיה [בא לפני] רבא. אמר ליה [לו] רבא: כל אימת [זמן] דמטית להתם בריך [שתבוא לשם, לאותו מקום שאירע בו הנס, בריך] "ברוך שעשה לי נס במקום הזה". וכן, מר בריה [בנו] של רבינא הוה קאזיל בפקתא [היה מהלך בבקעה] של ערבות וצחא למיא [והיה צמא למים]. אתעביד ליה ניסא, איברי ליה עינא דמיא, ואישתי [נעשה לו נס, ונברא לו מעין מים, ושתה]. ותו, זמנא חדא הוה קאזיל ברסתקא [ועוד, פעם אחת היה מהלך בשוק] של מחוזא ונפל עליה גמלא פריצא [והתנפל עליו גמל משוגע]. איתפרקא ליה אשיתא, על לגוה [נבקע לו הכותל, ונכנס לתוכו, וניצל]. ומאז, כי מטא [כאשר היה מגיע] לערבות, בריך [היה מברך] "ברוך... שעשה לי נס בערבות ובגמל". וכן כי מטא לרסתקא [כאשר היה מגיע לשוק] של מחוזא בריך [היה מברך] "ברוך... שעשה לי נס בגמל ובערבות", הרי שאף על נס של יחיד יש לברך! אמרי [אומרים] כהסבר לדבר: אניסא [על נס] של רבים כולי עלמא מיחייבי לברוכי [הכל חייבים לברך], ואולם אניסא [על נס] של יחיד איהו חייב לברוכי [הוא מחוייב לברך].

ברכות נד, א מהדורת שטיינזלץ



Miracles as Signs and Wonders

Exodus 4:1-8

But Moses spoke up and said, “What if they do not believe me and they do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?” The Lord said to Him, “What is that in your hand?” And he replied “A rod.” He said, “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail”—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”

Deuteronomy 13:2-4

If there appears among you a prophet or a dream diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent, saying “Let us follow and worship another god”—whom you have not experienced—even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed

the words of that prophet or that dream diviner. For the Lord your God is testing you to see whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

Gittin 56b

“And he said: Where is their God, the rock in whom they trusted?” This verse refers to the wicked Titus who blasphemed and insulted Heaven. What did he do? He took a harlot by the hand and entered the Holy of Holies and spread out a scroll of the Law and committed a sin on it. He then took a sword and slashed the curtain. Miraculously, blood spurted out, and he thought that he had slain the Holy One, Himself, as it says, “Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your assembly, they have set up their ensigns for signs.”

Ta’anit 18b

What is Trajan's [Day]? It was said: When Trajan was about to execute Lulianus and his brother Pappus in Laodicea (Lydia) he said to them, “If you are of the people of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, let your God come and deliver you from my hands, in the same way as He delivered Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah from the hands of Nebuchadnezzar”; and to this they replied: “Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were perfectly righteous men and they merited that a miracle should be performed for them, and Nebuchadnezzar also was a king worthy for a miracle to be performed through him, but as for you, you are a common and wicked man and are not worthy that a miracle be performed through you; and as for us, the Omnipresent has ordained that we deserve to die, and if you will not kill us, the Omnipresent has many other agents of death. The Omnipresent has in His world many bears and lions who can attack us and kill us; the only reason why the Holy One, blessed be He, has handed us over into your hand is that at some future time He may punish you in exchange for our blood.” Despite this he killed them. It is reported that hardly had they moved from there when two officials arrived from Rome and split his skull with clubs.

Ta’anit Navigator

- What are the criteria for deserving a miracle?
- Why is Nebuchadnezzar in this category, but Trajan is not?
- How does this passage challenge your understanding of what a miracle is?

Gittin Navigator

- Why is God performing miracles for Titus?
- According to this story, how would you define what a miracle is?

Exodus Navigator

- What is the purpose of the “sign” God gives to Moses?
- Would this ability given to Moses fit into what you consider a miracle? Why? Or why not?

Deuteronomy Navigator

- Given the story in Gittin and Ta’anit, how does one understand this commandment? When do we believe in signs and when are we supposed to be suspicious?
- What is the purpose of supernatural signs given by false prophets? Why does God allow it?

Miracles as Signs and Wonders

Maimonides, Rambam, Fundamental Concepts of the Torah 8:1-2

Israel did not believe Moses because of the signs Moses performed. For one who believes because of signs and wonders is deeply flawed, because signs could be performed through sorcery. The miracles that Moses performed were of necessity and not to prove the truth of prophecy...

Moses knew that anyone who believes [solely] because of signs is tainted and will be doubted, and expressed a reluctance to go by saying, "But behold they will not believe me." God told him that these signs will [continue to be performed and] applied only until they had left Egypt and assembled at Mount Sinai, whereupon any doubt will vanish, and also assured him that [at Mount Sinai] He will give signs that Moses had been sent by God in truth from the [very] beginning, and that no doubt will remain.

Maimonides Navigator

- Of all the sources you have read, which one seems to echo what Maimonides says, and why?
- Why is Maimonides suspicious of supernatural signs seemingly ordained by men?
- Take everything you have learned and try to write a working definition of what constitutes a miracle.

Miracles as Signs and Wonders

Hebrew Sources

כשבקש טוריינוס להרוג את המנהיגים החשובים לולינוס ופפוס אחיו בלודקיא, אמר להם: אם מעמו של חנניה מישאל ועזריה אתם – יבוא אלוקיכם ויציל אתכם מידי, כדרך שהציל את חנניה מישאל ועזריה מיד נבוכדנצר! אמרו לו לולינוס ופפוס: חנניה מישאל ועזריה צדיקים גמורין היו בעצמם, וראויין היו ליעשות להם נס. ועוד: ונבוכדנצר מלך הגון היה, שהיה מלך גדול שעלה לשלטון בזכות וראוי ליעשות נס על ידו, וגם אנו איננו צדיקים, ואנו נתחייבנו כליה למקום אתה, הדיוט הוא ולא מלך אמיתי ואינו ראוי ליעשות נס על ידו. ואתה הורגנו הרבה הורגים אחרים יש לו למקום, ואם לא יהרגו אותנו בני אדם והרבה דובין ואריות יש לו למקום בעולמו שפוגעין בנו והורגין אותנו. אלא, לא מסרנו הקדוש ברוך הוא בידך אף שהיה יכול להורגנו בדרך אחרת, אלא מפני שעתיד ליפרע דמינו מידך. אף על פי כן לא חשש לדבריהם ואף הרגן מיד. אמרו: לא זזו משם ממקום ההריגה עד שבאו דיופלי (זוג שליחים) מרומי שקיבלו ייפוי כוח להסירו משלטונו ולעונשו, ופצעו את מוחו בגיזרין של עץ והרגוהו.

תענית יח,ב מהדורת שטיינזלץ

ויען משה ויאמר: והן לא יאמינו לי ולא ישמעו בקלי, כי יאמרו לא נראה אליך ה'. ויאמר אליו ה': מה זה בידך? ויאמר: מטא. ויאמר: השליכהו ארצה, וישליכהו ארצה ויהי לנחש, וינס משה מפניו. ויאמר ה' אל משה: שלח ידך ואחז בזנבו, וישלח ידו ויחזק בו ויהי למטה בכפו. למען יאמינו כי נראה אליך ה' אלוקי אבתם, אלוקי אברהם, אלוקי יצחק ואלוקי יעקב. ויאמר ה' לו עוד: הבא נא ידך בחיקך, ויבא ידו בחיקו ויוצאהו, והנה ידו מצרעת כשלג. ויאמר: השב ידך אל חיקך, וישב ידו אל חיקו ויוצאהו מחיקו, והנה שבה כבשרו. והיה אם לא יאמינו לך ולא ישמעו לקל האת הראשון, והאמינו לקל האת האחרון.

שמות ד,א-ח

כי יקום בקרבך נביא או חלם חלום, ונתן אליך אות או מופת. ובא האות והמופת אשר דבר אליך לאמר: גלכה אחרים אלהים אחרים אשר לא ידעתם ונעבדום. לא תשמע אל דברי הנביא ההוא או אל חולם החלום ההוא, כי מנסה ה' אלוקיכם אתכם לדעת הישכם אהבים את ה' אלוקיכם בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם.

דברים פרק יג,ב-ד

”וְאָמַר אֵי אֱלֹקֵימוֹ צוּר חֲסִיוֹ בִּי” (דברים לב, לז) זה טיטוס הרשע שחירף וגידף כלפי מעלה. מה עשה כשכבש את בית המקדש? תפש זונה בידו ונכנס עימה לבית קדשי הקדשים, והציע ספר תורה תחתיו ועבר עליה עבירה עם הזונה, ואחר כך נטל סייף (חרב) וגידר (דקר) את הפרוכת, ונעשה נס והיה דם מבצבץ ויוצא, כסבור הרג את עצמו, כלומר, חשב שכביכול הרג את הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהרי יוצא דם, שנאמר: ”שָׁאָגוּ צִרְרִיד בְּקֶרֶב מוֹעֲדֶיךָ (בית המקדש) שָׁמוֹ אוֹתָתָם (את סימניהם) אֲתוֹת” (תהלים עד, ד), שסימן שעשה טיטוס בדקירת הפרוכת שמצליחים מעשיו, כאילו נתקיים.

גיטין נו,ב עם ביאור הרב שטיינזלץ

Miracles as Signs and Wonders

Hebrew Sources

משה רבינו לא האמינו בו ישראל מפני האותות שעשה, שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבו דופי, שאפשר שיעשה האות בלט וכשוף. אלא כל האותות שעשה משה במדבר לפי הצורך עשאו, לא להביא ראיה על הנבואה...

ז'הו שאמר לו הקב"ה בתחילת נבואתו בעת שנתן לו האותות לעשותן במצרים ואמר לו "ושמעו לקולך", ידע משה רבינו שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבבו דופי ומהרהר ומחשב, והיה נשמט מליך ואמר "והן לא יאמינו לי", עד שהודיעו זקב"ה שאלו האותות אינן אלא עד שיצאו ממצרים, ואחר שיצאו ויעמדו על ההר הזה יסתלק הרהור שמהרהרין אחריו.

רמב"ם, הלכות יסודי התורה ח,א-ב

Who Wants Miracles?

Many dream of what they might do if they were to be granted three wishes. Others have already spent the money they have yet to win in the lottery. The charm of having one's life transformed in a moment captures the imaginations of most of us. The Sages have insights on the consequences of miracles, and whether they are always desirable. The following Talmudic passages talk about the cost of miracles, and their sometimes negative consequences.

Shabbat 53b

The Sages taught: Once a man's wife had died leaving behind an infant in need of nursing, and he had no money to provide for a wet nurse. A miracle occurred for him and his breast opened up as the breasts of a woman, and he nursed his son.

Rav Yosef said: "Come and see how great a man this is. Such a miracle!"

Abayyeh said to him: "On the contrary, how terrible is this man that the order of creation was perverted."

Megilla 7b

Rabba and Rav Zera were sharing a Purim feast. They got drunk. Rabba got up and slaughtered Rav Zera. The following day, he begged for mercy and Rav Zera lived again. A year later, Rabba said to Rav Zera: "Let's get together and have another Purim feast together!" Rav Zera answered: "One cannot rely on miracles every year!"

Ta'anit 25a

Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa's wife asked: "How much longer must we suffer so?"

He asked her: "What should we do?"

She answered: "Let's ask for mercy that something should be given to you."

He begged for mercy, and a vision of a hand came forth and offered him one leg of a golden table.

She saw in a dream that in the future the righteous would eat on a three-legged golden table, but they would eat on a two legged table of gold.

After she told him the dream, he said to her: "Are you comfortable with the fact that the whole world will eat on a table that is complete and we will eat on a table that is lacking?"

She asked: "What should we do?"

He answered: "Let us beg for mercy and have Him take it from us!"

On this, they remarked that the second miracle was greater than the first one. For we have a tradition that gifts come from heaven, but they are never taken back...

Levy declared a public fast, but the rains didn't come.

He called out to God: "Sovereign of the Universe, You went up and sat in the heavens, and yet You have no mercy on your children?"

The rains came, but as a result, he became lame.

Thus Rabbi Elazar said: "One should never direct words of rebuke toward heaven. For a great man once did this, and he became crippled."

Ta'anit Navigator

- What is the relationship between a miracle that happens in this world and the reward one gets in the world to come?
- How did Rabbi Hanina's wife's dream help her to be reconciled with her poverty?
- Do you think that the notion that miracles are given but not taken back only applies to miracles or to other things as well?
- What tone does Levy use when no miracle is forthcoming?
- Why did these words cause him to be punished?
- What is the logic of punishing the one who asks but still granting the request?

Shabbat Navigator

- How do you understand what vexes Abayyeh about this "miracle"?
- Why does it not bother Rav Yosef?
- How would you respond if a similar "miracle" happened for you?

Megilla Navigator

- Had Rabba not prayed, one can assume no miracle would be forthcoming. What is the connection between prayers and miracles?
- Rav Zera does not accept Rabba's invitation. Why does he think it will necessarily be a repeat of what happened last year?
- What can we learn about Rabba and Rav Zera's respective approaches to miracles?

Who Wants Miracles?

Hebrew Sources

לוי גזר תעניתא [תענית] ולא אתא מיטרא [בא גשם]. אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם! עלית וישבת במרום ואין אתה מרחם על בניך! אתא מיטרא [בא גשם], אבל כעונש על דברים אלה שאמר בלשון חריפה ואיטלע [נעשה צולע]. ומשום כך אמר ר' אלעזר: לעולם אל יטיח (יזרוק, יטיל) אדם דברים כלפי מעלה בלשון קשה, שהרי אדם גדול הטיח דברים כלפי מעלה ואיטלע [ונעשה צולע] ומנו [ומי הוא]? – לוי.

תענית כה, א מהדורת שטיינזלץ

מעשה באחד שמתה אשתו והניחה לו בן שהיה צריך לינק ולא היה לו שכר מניקה ליתן, ונעשה לו גס ונפתחו לו דדין כשני דדי אשה והניק את בנו. אמר רב יוסף: בוא וראה כמה גדול אדם זה שנעשה לו גס כזה! אמר לו אביו: אדרבא (להיפך), כמה גרוע אדם זה שנשתנו לו סדרי בראשית.

שבת נג, ב מהדורת שטיינזלץ

רבה ור' זירא עבדו [עשו] סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי [ביחד], איבסום [השתכרו], קם רבה שחטיה [שחטו] את ר' זירא. למחר כשהתפקח וראה מה עשה, בעי רחמי ואחייה [ביקש עליו רחמים והחייהו]. לאחר שנה אמר ליה [לו] רבה לר' זירא: ניתי מר ונעביד [יבוא אדוני ונעשה] שוב סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי [ביחד]. אמר ליה [לו]: איני רוצה, וזאת לאור אירועי השנה שעברה. ואף שבסופו של דבר אכן קמתי לתחייה, מכל מקום הרי לא בכל שעתא ושעתא [שעה ושעה] מתרחיש ניסא [מתרחש נס] וחושש אני שמא מה שאירע בפורים שעבר יתרחש שוב וללא תקנה.

מגילה ז, ב מהדורת שטיינזלץ

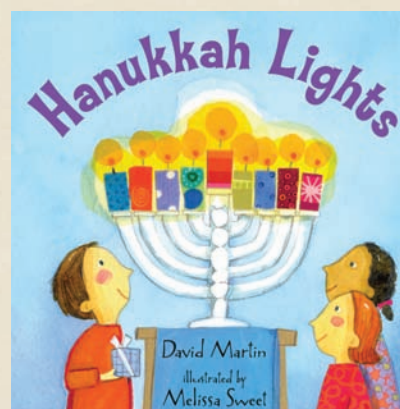


Hanukkah Lights

Hanukkah Lights
David Martin

Age Appropriate:
6 months–3 years

Class Length:
30–45 minutes



Look Closely and Select a Book

WHY THIS BOOK WAS SELECTED

- Bright, colorful pictures
- Simple text
- Depicts multi-ethnic children celebrating Hanukkah—illustrations joyfully portray the diversity of today's Jewish families
- Highlights many aspects of traditional Hanukkah celebrations

Identify Big Ideas

VALUES TO HIGHLIGHT

1. **Hiddur mitzvah:** ways to beautify and enhance the celebration of Hanukkah
2. **Pirsum ha-nes:** publicizing the Miracle-finding ways to make the meaning and miracles of Hanukkah visible to all
3. **Celebrating** Jewish life with joy!

GOALS OF PROGRAM

1. To familiarize families with some of the traditional rituals and customs of Hanukkah
2. To encourage families to think about new ways of celebrating the holiday of Hanukkah
3. For families to create an object—a safety menorah lighter—which will enable children to play a more active role in the celebration of Hanukkah



This book-based Program curriculum was developed by The PJ Library.

The **L-I-S-T-E-N** rubric was initially developed by Ina S.G. Regosin, Director, Hebrew College, Early Childhood Institute, with input from Rachel Raz and Sherry Grossman.

Program submitted by Vivian Newman, Western Ma.: vivian@hgf.org

Hanukkah Lights

Set the Scene

{ Introductory Activity }

Station Explorations—Exploring Some of the Symbols of Hanukkah

Note: When programming for very young children, having multiple activities at the ready helps keep the youngest engaged.

In this opening activity, families will visit 3 separate stations, where they will touch, explore, and play with various Hanukkah objects. Each station will focus on one Hanukkah symbol and will include several place cards and/or handouts that will describe some activities which families might like to try. Depending on one's space and the ages of the children expected, the stations can be arranged at tables or can be set up on the floor, using large tablecloths spread out on the floor and placed in separate areas of the room. (Arranging stations on the floor will accommodate the youngest of participants.)

STATION 1: EXPLORE A MENORAH

**Materials needed:**

- Variety of Hanukkah menorahs
- Hanukkah candles
- Homemade or store-bought play dough

The suggestion cards/handouts at this station may contain some of the following questions, information, and activity ideas:

- Carefully study all of the menorahs. Can you point to your favorite one?
- Look at all of the different colored Hanukkah candles. Which color candle is your favorite?
- Can you find ___ (state a number) of your favorite colored candles?
- Pick a menorah and try placing candles into it.
- There is one candle, called the shamash, which is traditionally higher or set off in some way from all of the other candles. Can you point to the space where the shamash will go on each menorah?
- Can you pretend to use the shamash to light all of the other candles that are in the menorah?
- Can you make your own menorah out of play dough? (One way to do this is to roll the dough into a snake shape, and then place 5-8 candles into the dough. Roll a large ball of dough for the shamash (or think of some other way to make a holder for the shamash). Can you use your shamash and pretend to light all of the candles on your play dough menorah?

STATION 2: DOZENS OF DREIDELS

**Materials needed:**

- Variety of dreidels
- Paper or plastic cups (opaque cups, *not* transparent ones)
- Cutouts of Hebrew letters—nun, gimmel, hey, shin)

Hanukkah Lights

The suggestion cards/handouts at this table might contain some of the following questions, information, and activity ideas:

- A dreidel is a type of spinning top that is traditionally played with on Hanukkah. The dreidel is said to remind us of the games of chance that the Maccabee soldiers played while hiding in caves, formulating and executing plans to win back the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.
- Can you spin a dreidel?
- Can you catch a spinning dreidel?
- How many dreidels can you get spinning at one time?
- Can you point to your favorite dreidel?
- Find a construction paper Hebrew letter. Place the letter in front of you. Can you slowly turn your dreidel and try to find a letter on your dreidel which matches the paper letter in front of you?
- Place 2 or 3 cups in front of you. Make sure that each cup is upside down. Hide one dreidel under one of the cups. Slide and push the cups all around, arranging and rearranging their order. Ask your child to point to the cup which is hiding the missing dreidel.

STATION 3: LOTS OF LATKES

Materials needed:

- Several homemade or store-bought frozen latkes, placed in taped sandwich bags (the bags are taped and sealed in order to discourage the eating of the latkes)
- Potatoes
- Frying pans—5 or more (please note that frying pans can also be made, by attaching a cardboard handle to a round aluminum pan)
- Paper latkes—oval shapes cut from grocery bags or brown or white paper
- Brown crayons

The suggestion cards/handouts at this table might contain some of the following questions, information, and activity ideas:

- A latke is a type of pancake that is made from potatoes. It is fried in oil and is traditionally eaten on Hanukkah. Can you find some potatoes and place them inside a frying pan? How many potatoes can you fit in a frying pan?
- Can you use a crayon and color some paper latkes?
- Can you place an empty frying pan on the floor in front of you? Pick up several of your colored latkes (you may use uncolored ones as well).
- Try to toss each paper latke into the pan. How many latkes can you get to land in the pan?

Adaptations for a Smaller Group

Two stations may be sufficient for a smaller group. Or with a smaller group (8 or fewer children) you may opt to abandon the station idea completely, and simply invite children to examine and play with just one type of item at a time. Once the children have thoroughly explored one ritual item, put that item away and bring out another item. Lead the entire group through the instructions listed on each station handout card.

Hanukkah Lights

Tell the Story

Advance Preparations:

- Using a scanner or a color photocopier, enlarge each page of the book.
- Prepare a paper cutout of a menorah. This menorah should have Velcro attached to the top of each candle space. If you will be displaying this menorah on a flannel board, be certain to attach Velcro to the back of the menorah as well.
- Cut out 9 paper candles—each candle should be cut from a different patterned paper or wrapping paper
- Using orange tissue or construction paper, cut out flames which can fit atop each candle

Materials/Props Needed:

- pillowcase
- Menorah (or two menorahs—one candle menorah and one oil menorah)
- Hanukkah candles
- Small jars of oil (may be purchased on line from Judaica.com)
- A large dreidel
- Frozen potato latkes, sealed in a plastic bag
- Chocolate Hanukkah gelt
- Paper cutout of a menorah
- 9 paper candles
- Paper flames (optional)
- Flannel board (optional)

LEADER INTRODUCTION

Invite all to join you in the reading area. Begin by saying:

“I hope that you all had fun exploring our very special Hanukkah objects. By now, I bet that you are well on your way to becoming Hanukkah experts. Today we are going to read a book called *Hanukkah Lights* which will show us many different ways to celebrate Hanukkah. Before we begin our reading I’d like to show you some of the objects which will appear in our book. Here in my pillowcase I have all kinds of special items and goodies that we use on Hanukkah. Let’s take a look at these items and see if we can share what we know about each one.”

Below is a description of some of the items which may be placed inside the bag pillowcase.

- **Menorah** (ideally 2 kinds—one for candles and one for oil)—Here I have a _____. What do we put in these menorahs?
- Yes, **candles**. Where do we put the candles? ___ In the spaces or holes that are provided. (Put in one candle. The first candle should go into the space on the menorah which would be on the far right if you were standing facing the menorah.) There is one space on this menorah for one very special candle. The special candle that I’m thinking of has a very important job. It lights all of the other candles. Do you know what that candle is called? Do you know where it goes? (Place shammash in its proper place.) Do you know how many nights we celebrate Hanukkah for? Let’s count the candle spaces and see. (Count out 8 spaces.) Each night we light one more candle. (Demonstrate by putting candles in.) On the first night we take our shammash and light one candle. On the second night, we put 2 candles in our menorah and light 2 candles (demonstrate how this is done). On the third night we light ___ candles. (Continue placing candles in and pretending to use the shammash to light them.)

Hanukkah Lights

(If the audience is still attentive, you may want to show the oil menorah. Keep in mind that the explanation for the oil menorah will probably most interest the adults in the audience. Children, however, will remain interested in the oil menorah, if you fill it with oil or placed prefilled oil containers into the candle spaces, and actually light the menorah. As you light the oil menorah you can explain that on Hanukkah, some people use oil rather than candles to light their menorahs. People use oil in their menorahs in order to more literally and visually commemorate one of the major miracles of Hanukkah—the miracle that oil which should have lasted for only one day burned for 8 days.)

Additional items to take from bag/pillowcase:

- **Dreidel:** the spinning top that we play with on Hanukkah
- **Latke:** the special potato pancake that we eat on Hanukkah
- **Chocolate Hanukkah gelt:** another treat that we eat on Hanukkah. (You can show the chocolate that's inside. If parents are willing, you may pass out a piece of gelt to each child.)

Now that we've taken a look at all of these special Hanukkah objects, I think that we're ready to read our book. I wonder how many of these objects we will find in our book.

Adaptations for Group Size and Age

Because of the young ages of the program participants, it is quite likely that the children may have a hard time sitting and remaining focused as each of the Hanukkah items are pulled from the bag. Various movement games may be introduced as each item is displayed. These games may also come in handy during the subsequent reading of the story.

MOVEMENT GAMES (which may be introduced as needed throughout the program)

- **Spin Like a Dreidel Game:** Encourage participants to spin like a dreidel as you sing dreidel-related songs. Ask participants to drop to the floor, or topple over whenever you say “stop.”
- **Melting Candle Game:** Participants clasp their hands together and raise them above their heads. As the candles burn, the children gently bend and slowly lower themselves to the floor.
- **Flashlight Games:** Remind participants that the holiday of Hanukkah is all about light. On Hanukkah we light the menorah to remind us of miracles. Shine a flashlight on the floor; encourage children to run towards and jump on any light spots that come near them. Attach a sheet to a wall. Shine a bright light in front of the sheet. Invite children to stand between the light and the sheet and jump and dance and make shadows on the wall. (The making of shadows corresponds to one of the pages of the *Hanukkah Lights* book.)

Hanukkah Lights

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION



Hold up each of the enlarged pages from the book, reading and showing the pictures one at a time.

As each page is displayed, the children's attention is directed to the picture of the menorah on that page. Ask the children, "How many candles do we light on this night of Hanukkah?" Count the candles with the children.

- Place the paper menorah on the flannel board. Point to a specific child and ask him/her to come to the flannel board and help you put the appropriate number of candles up on the board.
- Ask another child to use the paper shamash to light each candle. As the shamash touches a specific candle, add a flame to the top of that candle.
- Remember to narrate what the shamash is doing as you light the paper menorah. "Ok, it's the third night of Hanukkah. Let's make sure that there are 3 candles in the menorah. Let's pick up our special helper candle the shamash. Let's watch as that shamash lights the candles." Remove the flames before displaying the next menorah in the book.

Create hand motions and facial gestures to go along with several of the book's pages:

- On the latke page: blow on the latkes before pretending to eat them.
- On the dreidel page: ask the children to pretend to twist their hand and spin a dreidel.
- On the gelt page: mimic unpeeling and eating a chocolate coin.
- On the dancing page: ask children to stand up and dance to a Hanukkah song ("I have a little dreidel").

As you reach the last page of the book, ask the children if they can tell what time of day it is. Ask the children if the picture gives them a hint about where in the house one should light the menorah. Explain that on Hanukkah we place our menorah in the window because we want everyone who walks by our house to know that it is Hanukkah. When we display our menorahs in the window we are performing a special mitzvah called **Pirsum ha-nes**—we are publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah and letting everyone know just how special Hanukkah is.

Hanukkah Lights

Enhance the Experience

{ Follow-up Activity }

Making a Menorah Safety Lighter

Introduction: “Hanukkah is a very fun and special holiday. There are so many things to do on Hanukkah and so many good foods to eat. Can you tell me a few things that you look forward to doing on Hanukkah?”

Today we’re going to make something which you will be able to use every night of Hanukkah. It’s called a menorah safety lighter and you can use this lighter to help Mom or Dad or the other grown-ups in the house light the menorah. Does anyone remember the name of the special candle that we use to light all of the other candles?

We have to be very careful when we use the shamash.

When we light the menorah, we use matches and fire. Fire is very hot and very dangerous. We must never ever touch matches, fire, or a burning candle. If we can’t touch a burning candle, how will we be able to help light our menorah?”

Display the lighting stick and demonstrate how we can use this menorah safety lighter to help light the candles. “The menorah safety lighter helps to keep our hands and fingers far away from the fire. But remember, we can only use this safety lighter when a grown-up is with us and is helping us.”

Use the glue gun or tacky glue to attach the clothespin to one side of the paint stirrer.

If you do not wish to use paints and glitter (a fun but slightly messy experience for ones and twos), you may want to first cover the wooden paint stirrer with foil and then glue the clothespin onto the stirrer.

Adaptations**Older children**

May enjoy using a combination of paints, stickers, and collage materials on their paint stirrers.

Younger children

Should probably just use one type of material on their paint stirrers.

{ Follow-up Activity }**Materials/Props Needed:**

- Wooden paint stirrers (can usually be obtained, free of charge, at most hardware stores)
- Hot glue gun and glue sticks, or very strong glue such as Tacky Glue
- Aluminum foil
- Tempura paints (with a small amount of glue mixed into them)
- Paint brushes or cotton swabs
- Glitter (which can be placed in a small shaker such as an empty spice container or a small pill bottle with holes poked into the top)
- Glue or Mod Podge
- Tissue paper shapes
- Hanukkah candles
- Clothespins (the type with a metal spring that opens and closes)
- Stickers

Directions:

1. Parent and child select a paint stirrer to decorate
2. Children can decorate their lighting stick in several different ways:

They may paint their stirrer and then use a shaker to sprinkle glitter on top

OR: They may decorate a foil-covered paint stirrer by attaching stickers to the foil

OR: They may spread glue or Mod Podge onto the foil and then place tissue paper shapes on top of the glue. Once the tissue paper is in place, spread an additional layer of glue on top of the shapes. Sprinkle on glitter.

Hanukkah Lights

Nurture the Family

Prepare a Hanukkah booklet for the families to take home. Ideally, the booklet should include:

- instructions and pictures depicting how to light a menorah
- a copy of the blessings for lighting the candles
- directions for playing the dreidel game and a recipe for latkes
- a listing of websites which will provide families with additional information on Hanukkah

Let parents know of upcoming events. Be sure to give them a list of additional family Hanukkah celebrations which will be occurring within the community.

{ Try This at Home }

WEB SITES

Hanukkah Customs, Practices, and Information:

Akhlah: The Jewish Children's Learning Network
www.akhlah.com/

Preschool Education Music and Songs:
Hanukkah

www.preschooleducation.com/shanukkah.shtml
www.myjewishlearning.com/

Web sites which will provide recordings
of popular Hanukkah songs:

JCC Associations Early Childhood
Curriculum Project "This New Month"
www.jccathisnewmonth.org/5769/kislev/
kislevson3.asp

