

OUR JEWISH YEAR

SESSION I: LIVING IN JEWISH TIME & HANUKKAH

BIG QUESTION FOR THE SERIES: WHAT DO THE HOLIDAYS OF THE JEWISH CALENDAR MEAN TO US, AS MODERN, LIBERAL JEWS?

Using Abigail Pogrebin's book *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew* for background and discussion prompts, participants will explore Jewish holidays, learn about their meanings, and consider what meaning they (can) have in our busy lives today. Participants will consider if and how their understanding of Jewish time makes them live their lives in a specific (or new) way.

BIG QUESTIONS FOR THIS SESSION:

What is "Jewish time," and what are its universal and particularistic elements?

Where do we find meaning in Jewish time?

As we prepare for Hanukkah, what are the different meanings we have ascribed to the holiday, and do any of them resonate for us today?

BEFORE THE SESSION:

Read pp. 1-18 and 103-114 in Abby Pogrebin's book *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*.

MATERIALS:

Name tags, or table-top name cards

Pens or markers

Two pads of sticky-notes, of two different colors

INTRODUCTION

WHEN YOU ARRIVE (10:00):

For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else's name.

If the group is new, or has new members, ask each person to introduce themselves to the group, sharing a) their name, and b) their favorite Jewish holiday when they were a child.

OPENING ACTIVITY (20:00)

Place sticky notes in center of the group. Each participant gets a pen/marker.

Discuss as a group:

1. As an adult, what holidays do you celebrate? Which holiday practices are meaningful to you, and which leave you cold?

Individually, consider these questions:

1. What holiday (e.g., Shabbat) or holiday-specific ritual (e.g., lighting candles) do you enjoy now? Write your answer(s) on <yellow> sticky notes. Include your name on the note!
2. What holiday or holiday-specific ritual do you feel negatively or ambivalently about? Write your answer(s) on <blue> sticky notes. Don't forget to include your name.

Post your sticky notes on a table or wall. Do this without talking. Group similar answers together, no matter the color of the sticky note. When notes are posted, continue with a group discussion:

1. Why do you find a certain holiday or ritual meaningful? Why do you find others not meaningful?
2. What makes these holidays and rituals meaningful to one participant, and not meaningful to another?
3. Would you have answered these questions differently as a child? As a younger adult? Why or why not?

FROM MY JEWISH YEAR (10:00)

This curriculum is built on Abby Pogrebin’s book, My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew. The readings, discussions, and activities will help each participant answer the questions of why Jews celebrate the holidays we do and will help facilitate each participant’s decision about whether and how to celebrate these holidays today. The curriculum includes Chanukah, Tu B’Shevat, Purim, Passover, Yom Hazikaron and Yom Haatzmaut, Shavuot, and Shabbat. As the group follows Pogrebin’s journey through her book, participants will have their own experience of journeying through the Jewish year.

Please have one participant read aloud:

Rabbi David Ingber (My Jewish Year, p. 1)

Contrary to the other three hundred days of the year, when you’re running and doing and building and constructing, the Jewish holidays provide a kind of in-built way to pause and to gather yourself and regenerate.... Our lives can become so full of activities and to-do tasks that, in some sense, the soul becomes overwhelmed. We need to defragment our souls. We can be pulled in so many different directions, but the holidays help that part of us that needs meaning and connection and great purpose.... Holiday rituals are ancient technologies that carry contemporary wisdom. Judaism works.

Now, another member reads aloud:

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld (My Jewish Year, p. 1)

Judaism at its best—the ritually Jewish things—are things that help you pay attention. The holidays are not about doing the Jewishly Jewish things—the things that only Jews do. They are about awareness and mindfulness and paying attention. How do you live a life when you’re paying attention?

Discuss as a group:

1. What is the purpose of observing Jewish time and ritual, according to each of these rabbis?
2. Drawing from your own experience, what are the Jewish calendar’s universal elements?
3. What makes the Jewish calendar uniquely Jewish, according to Rabbis Ingber and Strassfeld?
4. How do you mark Jewish time differently than American time, or other religions’ time? Consider both lifecycle moments (e.g., coming-of-age rituals like b’nai mitzvah or entering high school, or different rituals accompanying birth and death) and annual observances (e.g., Rosh Hashanah / New Years, Chanukah / Christmas, Passover / Easter / spring break).

*One participant reads aloud **pages 14-15 (from “One rabbi, Irwin Kula...” to “...we haven’t really looked there.”** In pairs (chevruta), discuss:*

1. Abby Pogrebin decided to observe the Jewish calendar in order to find her own meaning in ancient practices. Why does it matter to me to mark Jewish time?

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2. Pogrebin hoped it would be true that she would have a deeper understanding of Jewish traditions at the end of her “Jewish year.” What do you hope will be true for you at the end of this curriculum?

Hanukkah (חנוכה)

DIVING INTO OUR TRADITION (20:00)

What does Chanukah mean? Why do we celebrate it? In My Jewish Year, Abby Pogrebin discusses four explanations for the holiday. The following texts present these reasons: The celebration of a military victory; defending against assimilation; marking a miracle; and participating in winter gift-giving. In pairs (chevruta), read the following four texts. Discussion questions follow the texts:

Military Victory (I Maccabees 4:35-59)

Then Judah and his brothers said to the people: “Behold, the enemy is defeated before us, now let us go up and purify the Sanctuary of the Lord.” All the men of the army gathered, and they went together up to Mount Zion. And it was then they saw the Holy Temple desolate, and the altar profaned, and the doors burned with fire and the courts destroyed, and grasses of the field sprouting all over it. They tore their clothes and threw dirt on their heads and greatly mourned. They blew blasts on the trumpets and fell on their faces and their cry reached the heavens.

And Judah commanded one regiment of his men to lay siege to the fortress until they had purified the Holy Temple. And he chose from among the priests who had not been defiled and who had not abandoned the covenant of their God, and he commanded them to purify the Holy Temple, and to throw in an unclean place the stones which had been defiled. And they saw that the altar for burnt offerings had been profaned, and they took counsel together in order to decide what to do. And the plan which they devised was to pull it down altogether, in order that it not be a stumbling block for them since foreigners had profaned it. And they tore it down.

And they placed the stones on the Temple mount in a certain place, until a prophet would arise in Israel and instruct them in what ought to be done. And they took whole stones which iron had never touched, as is written in God’s Torah, and they built a new altar in the likeness of the first one. And they repaired the breaches in the Holy Temple, and all that which was within the sanctuary, and they sanctified the courtyard and all that was in it.

And they renewed all the sacred vessels, and replaced the menorah in the sanctuary, and the incense altar and the table of the show-bread. And they placed the incense on the altar and brought lamps back up on the menorah in order to light the Temple. And they placed the show bread on the table, and the dividing curtain on the ark, and all the work was completed as it was originally.

And it was on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is Kislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year that they rose early in the morning and offered burnt offerings on the new altar according to the law. And they dedicated (ויחנכו) the altar on the very day that the foreigners had made it impure, and they

gave praise to God with song, harps, flutes, and chimes. And they fell on their faces and bowed low to God for giving them might and salvation.

And they celebrated the rededication of the altar (חנוכת המזבח) for eight days,¹ and offered burnt offerings, and thanksgiving offerings out of the joy of their hearts. And they adorned the surface of the sanctuary with crowns and gold shields, and purified the gates and the courts of the priests, and replaced the doors. And there was great rejoicing among the whole people, because God had removed from them the disgrace of other nations. And Judah, and his brothers, and all the community of Israel were commanded to celebrate each year the rededication of the altar on the twenty-fifth day of month of Kislev, for eight days, with praise and thanksgiving to God.

At this time, they also built thick walls and high towers around the Temple on Mt. Zion, so that the nations should never again destroy it as this time. Judah set a military post amongst them to guard the Temple; he also fortified Bethsura in order to defend them against Idumea.

Against Assimilation (*My Jewish Year*, pp. 106-108

...It turns out that Hanukkah is, in part, a tale of Jew vs. Jew.

Come again? Us against us? Whatever happened to Jew against Greek; Maccabee vs. Antiochus? The more complete story, asserted by rabbi after rabbi, is that the Maccabees (aka the Hasmoneans) took on not just Antiochus IV, who in 167 B.C.E. forbade Jewish practice. The Maccabees challenged their *fellow Jews for selling out*--embracing Greek culture, Hellenization, because they were either seduced by it or afraid to disobey authority.

...

I know it's too simplistic to say the Maccabees stand in for the observant while the rest of us are Hellenized. But implicit in so many of the Hanukkah teachings I'm now reading is that Jews are in danger of losing our direction--our *distinctiveness*--and abandoning the traditions, language, and texts that make us Jews.

Am I Hellenized? Would the Maccabees have viewed me as a threat to Jewish life? Hanukkah makes me question this for the first time.

¹ No reason is given for the celebration lasting eight days, but historians believe it is because the Jews had been unable to celebrate Sukkot properly, with the Temple in Greek hands. So they celebrated for eight days as soon as it became possible--in Kislev, after the rededication of the Temple. See Pogrebin, pp. 110-111.

Miracle of the Oil (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b)²

In the Talmud, the Rabbis³ discuss Hanukkah, and provide a different reason for its celebration: **What is Hanukkah**, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: **The Sages taught in *Megillat Ta'anit*: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them.** What is the reason? **When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary** by touching them. **And when the Hasmonean monarchy** [also known as the Maccabees] **overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest**, undisturbed by the Greeks. **And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving** in prayer and blessings.

Winter Gift-Giving (*My Jewish Year*, p. 112)

Still intent on adding facts to the rosy-colored Hanukkah story, I go the whole nine yards and call Seth Schwartz, the hard-hitting Professor of Classical Jewish Civilization at Columbia University. ...[He] suggests that we are materialists, pointing out that Hanukkah was never a major holiday until Christmas exploded. “Three generations ago, who cared about Hanukkah?” asks Schwartz. “Our ancestors in the Old Country, they lit candles on Hanukkah. That was it. There wasn’t a fuss about it. We needed a big story to compete with the Christmas story. So I think it’s specifically American.”

I leave Schwartz’s office feeling sheepish about my kids’ present pile.

Discussion questions:

1. Of the four explanations for Hanukkah, which is most compelling for you? Which explanation is least compelling?
2. What does Hanukkah mean to you? Why do you celebrate the holiday? How does your understanding of Hanukkah’s meaning affect how you celebrate the holiday, if at all? Which of the stories above connects most deeply to the reasons behind your own observance?

² English translations of the Talmud often include both literal translation and explanation of context, background, and transition. Here, the literal translation is given in **bold type**, while the explanatory text is in regular type.

³ The Rabbis lived in a time (2nd-6th century CE) after the Temple had been destroyed; after the Roman siege of 70 CE, the Temple was not in foreign hands (like it had been under the Greeks), but had been torn down entirely. The Temple was understood literally as God’s home--and with the destruction of the Temple, God no longer had a home on earth, among the Jews. By inserting a miracle into the story, the Rabbis were giving God a place in the narrative. They were teaching that God could still remain among the Jews, even if God’s home no longer existed, and God’s people were in exile from Zion.

MORE FROM JEWISH TRADITION (20:00)

One of the mitzvot of Hanukkah, according to the Rabbis of the Talmud, was to light the Hanukkah candles outside one's house (if one lives at street-level), or in one's window (if one lives on an upper story). Later commentators understood the reason for this to be public acknowledgement of the Hanukkah miracle--and by extension, the public acknowledgement of being Jewish.

Discuss as a group:

1. Why do you think the Rabbis commanded us to publicly identify ourselves as Jews during Hanukkah?
2. In your life, have there been times when you publicly identified yourself as a Jew? Have there been times when you avoided doing so?

CONCLUSION (10:00)

Discuss as a group:

1. Did the texts we read about Hanukkah (Pogrebin, Maccabees, Talmud) change your understanding of the holiday? Does the holiday feel more or less important to celebrate?
2. In light of where you find meaning in Hanukkah, how would you ideally celebrate the holiday? Is there (or would you like there to be) a connection between your understanding of the holiday and how you celebrate it?
3. Is there something you want to commit to trying for Chanukah this year?
 - Light candles all 8 nights (bring light into the world)
 - Facebook/social media post (publicizing the miracle)
 - Latke party (call to Jewish observance)
 - Night of giving (improve wider world)
 - Other ideas?

Next session will begin with an update on each participant's experience of celebrating Hanukkah. There's no pressure to change the way anyone celebrates, this will simply be an opportunity to reflect back on how these discussions impacted how participants think about the holiday.