

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם
Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Haolam
A FOUNTAIN OF BLESSINGS

The sequence of words in a Hebrew blessing is like a path of stepping-stones. The opening six words common to all *berachot* are an invocation or an overture, announcing our intention to channel blessing and raise up sparks of holiness. The words prepare the path for our offering as a theater stage anticipates and makes space for a play. As we engage each of these words, we set the stage, raise the curtain, and bring up the spotlights.

We begin in the silence that precedes any sound or movement. Jewish tradition asks that we not say a *bracha* until we have quieted the mind and focused our attention on the blessing's purpose. "One should not toss a *bracha* from one's mouth," instructs the Talmud. The 11th C commentator *Rashi* adds: "a *bracha* should be said slowly and deliberately. Don't rush through as if you are carrying a heavy burden and cannot wait to be set free of it." In quiet attentiveness we focus and allow an opening for mindfulness.

Begin the words of your *bracha* only when you feel ready, holding in your heart the desire that your *bracha* be for the sake of *kedusha*, holiness in the world.

ברוך

Baruch, the first word is commonly translated as "blessed."

It shares a Hebrew root with the word for knee, *ברך*, suggesting the humility of bending the knee, kneeling. What does it mean to kneel, and what does kneeling have to do with blessing? The word *berech* requires the cultivation of awe and reverence, wonder and deep humility. These are essential attributes of any individual or community walking the path of blessing.

The letters of *baruch* also share a root with the Hebrew word *בריכה*, "fountain" or "pool." Our *brachot*, our blessings are like pumps circulating the water from the pool back up to the top where the *shefa*, the abundant flow of goodness, continues to pour down. In this way, we receivers are also givers. Each particle of creation is both a receptive vessel and an active channel. We humans are self-aware vessels who can know that our souls... must be kept open if we are to continue to receive and pour out. We have the capacity to make a conscious choice to be vessels of blessing and keep the fountain flowing.

Baruch Ata Adonai, a fountain of blessings are You, source of all berachot.

Jewish tradition teaches that we should be able to say 100 *brachot* a day. Our lives should be so rich and varied, so filled with awareness, that our souls will want to stretch 100 times a day!

adapted from Rabbi Marcia Prager, *The Path of Blessings*

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Questions for Reflection

in chevruta break-out groups

When Reb Marcia speaks of a “fountain” of blessing, what is the fountain?
What is a fountain of blessing to you? What images arise? What experiences do you associate with such a fountain. Have you ever felt that you are dipping in?
How do you think you take part in keeping the fountain flowing?

What does it mean to be both a receiver of blessing *and* a channel of blessing?
Do you notice receiving blessing/In what sorts of situations?
How do you experience yourself (or when do you experience yourself) to be a channel of blessing?

Have you ever knelt in prayer? In what context(s)?
If so, what does that feel like, in body; in spirit?

What other prayer postures have you assumed? Or postures of blessing (I, for example, often offer a Namaste, with my palms pressed together and a little bow of reverence, honoring another individual.)?
In what circumstances? And what do these postures mean to you; what do you mean to signify or convey?

(Note: Reb Marcia also teaches that when we rise to our feet in prayer, we are raising energy up. When we are seated, we pull spiritual energy down.)

Here’s a challenge: Can we notice the rich variety in our lives enough to offer 100 blessings or gratitudes a day?

CANDLE LIGHTING

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Chanukah.*

A Fountain of Blessings are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of time and space,
Who has made us holy through mitzvot,
and instructed us to kindle the light of Chanukah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים
לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ, בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזְמַן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam,
sh'asah nisim la-vo-teinu,
bayamim ha-hem ba-z'man hazeh.*

A Fountain of Blessings are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of time and space,
Who worked miracles for our ancestors, in the days of old
and in our own time.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁחַיָּנוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ
וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזְמַן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam,
sh'he-che-yanu, v'ki-ye-manu v'hi-gi-anu la-z'man hazeh.*

A Fountain of Blessings are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of time and space,
who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time.

Hanukkah Blessing of the Imam Ibrahim Baba, Dec 2013

*In this season of the play of darkness and light,
Of death and re-birth,
Of the many and of the One,
May we be blessed to be the People of Light, those who carry within us and body forth in the world
Light upon LIGHT!*

*In these times of brokenness, alienation, fear of each other, fear of fear
May we be blessed to find our inner tzaddik of all genders,
May we be blessed to go to the places where we are called to release and raise Divine sparks;
May we liberate those sparks of Light wherever we go,
Especially amongst those and in those places that are the most forgotten and ignored.
May Daylight break in the middle of the Night
And turn into Day a Night which is still there
But which becomes a Night of Light:
Light upon LIGHT!*

*May we as People of the Wisdom of the Heart
Be blessed to draw near, like our many holy ancestors, to the
Brilliant luminosity in darkness and the brilliant darkness in luminosity
May we, like the lights of Hanukkah which shine towards the outside,
Be blessed to have inside become outside
And outside become inside,
Both dwelling and indwelling radiantly together.*

*May we then be blessed to go together into the world
As bold tikkun olamologists,
Healing the world,
Transforming the world
As we transform ourselves:
Light upon LIGHT!*

*May we create a world where beings of all species go from strength to strength in blessed harmony With Light
before us and behind us,
Above us and beneath us
On our left and on our right
Within us and outside of us:
Light upon LIGHT!*

a meditation on light

break – warm up latkes?

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BLESSING FOR FOOD

that is not bread or baked goods or fruits/vegetables

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu M'kor Ha-chayyim
sh'ha-kol ni-hiyeh b'd'varo.*

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GRACE AFTER MEALS

one alternative

From Pslam 145

פֹּתַח אֶת יָדְךָ שְׂבִיעַ לְכֹל חַי רָצוֹן

*Poteach et yadecha
u-masbia l'chol chai ratzon*

You open Your hand,
I open my heart
to this abundance.
And all life, all will is satisfied;
And all life, all will is satisfied.

translation and melody: Shefa Gold

EVOLUTION OF THE HOLIDAY

in chavruta break-out groups

let's take notes, tracking evolution of the holiday's meaning and custom

1 from II Maccabees 10:1-8 (2nd-1st c. BCE)

Judah Maccabee with his men, led by the Lord, recovered the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. He demolished the altars erected by the heathen in the public square and their sacred precincts as well. When they had purified the sanctuary, they constructed another altar; then, striking fire from flints, they offered a sacrifice for the first time for two whole years and restored the incense, the lights and the show bread...The sanctuary was purified on the 25th day of Kislev, the same day of the same month as that on which foreigners had profaned it. The joyful celebration lasted for eight days... A measure was passed by the public assembly, which stated that the entire Jewish nation should celebrate these days every year.

2 from Josephus, Antiquities, (c. 94 C.E.)

Now Judas [Maccabeus] celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the Temple for 8 days, and omitted no sort of pleasures; he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms... They made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.

3 from Talmud, Shabbat 21a, (c. 500-700 C.E.)

What is Chanukah? Our rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev begin the eight days of Chanukah, on which we refrain from eulogizing the dead and from fasting. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils in it, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed over them and defeated them, they searched and found only one bottle of oil that had been sealed by the High Priest. It contained only enough for one day's lighting, but a miracle was brought about with it, and they lit from it for eight days. The following year they were established as a festival, with Hallel and thanksgiving.

note: From a historical vantage point, there is no doubt that the origin of the holiday lies in the Hasmonean military victory. However, the rabbis effectively rebranded the holiday so that instead of glorifying Hasmonean military prowess, the holiday instead glorifies the unconditional and miraculous divine light that Jews can depend on, even in the gloomiest of darkness.

4 from Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

Our rabbis taught: when the first human (Adam) saw the daylight hours were becoming shorter and shorter, he said, "Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and is returning to chaos (*tohu va-vohu*). This is the death sentence declared upon me by Heaven!" He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. After the winter solstice when he saw the days becoming longer and longer, he said, "This is simply the way of the world!" He went and made an eight-day festival . . . He established them for the sake of Heaven.

what is added, here, to the meaning of the holiday?

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ON LIGHT, MIRACLE, IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM

new chavruta breakout groups

5 Sefat Emet, R. Yehudah Leib of Ger, (1871)

Talmud teaches: *And we are not permitted to make use of them [the Chanukah lights], but rather only to see them...*

The *mitzvah* is to see the Chanukah lamp. This means that the Chanukah lamps give light for each soul so that it will be able to see itself in the manner self-reflection and awareness... The miracle of the lamps was to give the power of illumination to everyone whose eyes have grown too dark for [such] seeing. The Talmud states: "Lamp light is good for making an inspection" – i.e., lamps are used for searching out our interior, for it is written (Proverbs 20:27): [*A person's soul is God's lamp*] which searches out all the innermost parts...

"*The innermost parts*" refers to the point of vitality in each soul that comes from the blessed Holy One, as it is written (Genesis 2): *and God breathed into his nostrils the soul of life*. [Divine light] searches the holes and cracks in a person's soul, trying to find a proper place to spread its illumination. Thus, it is exactly like the lamp-light searching for oil in the wick... Even if a person is enslaved to the *yetzer ha-rah* / evil inclination and is unaware of the truth, s/he shall be able to see with the help of God's lamp. What is God's lamp? It is the *mitzvot* (righteous deeds), which are called "lamps."

the above is a powerful Chasidic statement of the holiday, as it applies to our self-development
please re-state in your own words

note:

paraphrase of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, excerpted from *The Seven Lights*

The book of Proverbs (Proverbs 6:23) teaches: *The mitzva is a flame and the Torah, light*. The Torah reflects the infinite light, whereas the *mitzva* (a single deed) sheds light on a specific individual in a specific situation. But the *mitzva* is also a flame, in the sense that whereas light enables us to see, fire acts upon things and transforms them. The *mitzva* does both things: it changes the world by illuminating it.

6 *Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Jewish Holidays (1973)*

A favorite rabbinic question concerning Chanukah is, What is the miracle of the very first day of the Temple's re-dedication, since there was enough oil in the cruse to burn for that day? To my mind, the answer that comes closest to the meaning of Chanukah is that the miracle the first day was the deep faith that it took to light the menorah, knowing there was not enough oil for eight days. That same faith led the Maccabees to revolt against impossible odds... They believed they would prevail "not by strength, nor by power, but through My spirit—says Adonai." This faith allowed them to light the menorah, and it is this faith that made it burn for 8 days. It is the miracle of faith despite darkness, and of belief in the growth of light in the depths of winter.

[have you ever taken a leap of faith?](#)

[would you call it a \[minor\] miracle to have the courage to act against all odds, and prevail?](#)

7 *Rabbi Shefa Gold (contemporary)*

As the days grow short and the night darkness long, we are invited to enter the darkness of our own hearts. There, buried beneath the rubble of our disappointments, we find the miraculous spark of our Divinity, the awesome knowledge that we are each created in the image of God. This is the spark that kindles our Festival of Lights. Each night of Chanukah, we light another candle. Each night the light grows brighter, shining its radiance into our own hidden places.

The "Great Miracle" of healing is happening right here within us when we call light into our own places of Darkness, when we bring the healing light of compassion into hidden crevices of shame or fear. As we light the flames of Chanukah, may we kindle the flame within that will shine the light of awareness across the true expanse of Soul.

[how does this take differ from the classic Chassidic teaching of The Sfatai Emet?](#)

Matthew Gindin (contemporary)

The other important side of Chanukah is the celebration of the Maccabean revolt against the persecution wrought by the Seleucid Greek empire of Antiochus Epiphanes. This side celebrates both Jewish defiance of those who want us to assimilate and give up our identity, and more broadly the defiance of totalizing empires which wish to reduce everyone to the same, or wish to dominate and disempower minorities.

The peace and love celebrated by the light of Hanukkah is not one which asks everyone to repress or abandon their differences, but rather asks us to love both the neighbor who is like us (Leviticus 19:17) and the stranger who is not (Leviticus 19:34).

For many Jews Chanukah has become not just a holiday for affirming our Jewishness (made all the more self-conscious by the proximity to Christmas) but also a time to rededicate themselves to fighting for diversity and the rights of the other everywhere.

Rabbi Hannah Dresner

As Jews, we are called to be *or lagoyim*, a *light to the nations*, a people actively beaming the radiance all humans have the power to project. We are summoned to set an example, kindling kindness, spreading the light of peace, enlightening with wisdom, igniting joy. We're mandated to provide a glimpse of the world as we wish it to be and as every child has the right to expect it to be. Still, for all the nobility of our calling, we are profoundly human, so often preoccupied and self-absorbed, forgetting our mission. The gift of Chanukah is that it offers eight opportunities to refocus. Chanukah teaches that just as the Maccabees rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem after its lights were extinguished, we can re-establish ourselves as emissaries of light and conduits of light.

The Maccabean miracle was not purely supernatural. They fought their foes, cleaned up their sanctuary, hastened to produce more oil, and maintained faith. And for us, the miracle is that, despite our lapses, we are still and always empowered to return to the task of maintaining the flow of light in our world. Our holidays are never just a commemoration, always also a consciousness raising and a call to action. So, we ask ourselves: what temple will we restore this year? What lamp will we relight?

Hanukah in the Forest

by Yehuda Elberg, as told to Gilah Langner

After the Warsaw ghetto was liquidated, I went with a few other people to a big, dense forest in Eastern Poland. We joined up with some others and together we tried to sabotage the rails that were taking food and ammunition to the Eastern Front. We did manage to derail some trains, and it drove the Germans crazy. We were like a little bug in the eye of an elephant. They sent an entire division of soldiers to comb the forest to get us.

It was winter then, and the Germans could track us through our footsteps in the snow. It was a very dangerous situation and for the first time I was very scared. We had nothing to lose, but here we were once again facing death. We divided whatever food we had among the twenty of us or so, and whatever ammunition we had we divided. And then we divided the matches. This was a big thing, although it sounds funny, but a match was a treasure. We could always go in the field and dig out potatoes or even steal some, but the matches were our only means of cooking the food. So we divided our small supply of matches, and I got six of them. And then we separated.

That night was a very dark night. The darkness was the kind where you felt you could touch it. You could close your fist and the darkness would remain inside it. If I tried to move, I fell over stones or bushes, or I bumped into a tree. I walked a little and then I sat down. I was alone. I couldn't leave the forest because it was surrounded by soldiers, not to mention the soldiers inside the forest that were looking for us.

I was alone, completely alone, and so lonesome -- a loneliness more painful than a wound. I was starting to feel sorry for myself, and this was a dangerous thing. It dulls one's initiative, it takes away your energy. It was December, in deep winter, and I tried to think what was going on in the world. I decided it must be Hanukah, and a wave of nostalgia came over me thinking about being home on Hanukah with the children and candles and Hanukah gelt. In Poland, the Jews would light their candles in the windows or in an open door because of the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisah* -- to spread word of the miracle of Hanukah.

Tears started to run down my face thinking of this, and because it was so cold, the tears were sharp and freezing. But as I thought about Hanukah candles in the Jewish home, suddenly it stopped being a sad thought. I started to imagine that stars were coming out in the sky. You know how some stars are not visible until the night gets darker. I thought: up there it is also Hanukah, they're lighting the candles! Then I thought: there are Jews all over the world, and in every Jewish home there are now Hanukah candles burning. I put my hand in the pocket of my jacket and touched the matches. I thought, I have matches but where could I get candles? But then I realized that I didn't need candles. I had the matches!

I lit one match. And then another, and another. I lit all six matches, and I made the blessing, *lehadlik ner shel Hanukah*, and said a *Shehechayanu*. And suddenly I felt that I could see candles all over the world and the loneliness melted away.

I think now that this saved my life. I had no matches left to make a fire and this was a great hardship, but lighting the matches that night saved me from despair.

This was a Hanukah I would remember all my life.

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Yehuda Elberg (1912-2003) was a Yiddish novelist, essayist, community organizer, textile engineer, and businessman. He established the first Jewish newspaper in Poland after WW II, and was the recipient of the Israeli Prime Minister's Award for Yiddish Literature in 1985. He spent his final decades in Montreal.

