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הארות **ILLUMINATIONS**

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What is Chanukah?

Abigail Huebner '18

“What is Chanukah?” - the Gemara in Masechet Shabbat on Daf 21b asks, and Rashi explains that this question is really asking, “על איזה גס קבורעה?” - “On the basis of what miracle was Chanukah established?” The Gemara then goes on to explain the miracle that we all know well; the Greeks defiled almost all of the pure oil left in the Beit Hamikdash, but the Jews finally found one little jug of oil, barely enough to last for one day. The oil defied the odds and lasted for eight days instead. And so we celebrate. This miracle has always struck me as a strange thing to celebrate; after this major military victory where we survived against all odds, why is the oil the miracle that we choose to acknowledge? Of course the menorah’s

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Names Not Numbers

Zachary Maurer '19

The lighting of the menorah, for me, is much more than a joyful celebration of Jewish victory; it is a time for true reflection. For the past two Chanukahs my family has been using a menorah that belonged to my Aunt Ilsa, and this heirloom reminds me of her past and her own personal miracles. As my grandfather’s sister, Aunt Ilsa was like a grandmother to me and my siblings. She passed away in June of 2015, right before my middle school graduation. The timing of her passing is also of particular importance, as it was just as my school finished the *Names Not Numbers* project. *Names Not Numbers* is a project wherein students research, interview, video, and edit a Holocaust survivor’s story to memorialize it through a

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RAMAZ
ישיבת רמז

The Significance of the Dreidel and Its Connection to Gambling

Julia Levi '18

As a child, one of the things about Chanukah that most excited me was the opportunity to play with the dreidel and collect chocolate gelt. I was always told that playing with the dreidel is a commemoration of the way in which the Jewish people distracted the Greek authorities from realizing that they were engaging in Torah learning. However, is this even true? It seems odd to connect a game that really only began showing up in Jewish tradition in the 18th century to Torah learning and the story of the Maccabees.

In fact, the idea of a dreidel isn't even inherent to Jewish tradition. The spinning top game really comes from the Irish game "totum", which originated in the 1500s. Each side of the spinning top had a letter: "T" for "Take All," "H" for "Half," "P" for "Put Down," and "N" for "Nothing." There was a similar German equivalent to this game (with the same letters), and from Yiddish culture, the game of dreidel became adopted into the Jewish tradition.

But there is still a pressing question regarding this game. What is the point of playing it, and how does it have to do with the holiday of Chanukah in particular? Also, the idea of playing the dreidel can be a little troublesome, as it seems to share the qualities of gambling. How can we justify playing this game on Chanukah? And how can we understand these two pressing questions together?

To solve the problem in terms of gambling, we can first look at Sanhedrin Daf 24b to define the reason for not gambling. There, it says that "*HaMesachek BeKubya*," or "one who plays with dice," cannot be a witness in court. There are two ways of understanding why this is the case. Rami Bar Chama claims that gambling is an

asmachta, meaning that it is a reliance on something that is false. A bettor relies on the game of gambling, and then when he loses, the money is taken against his will—it is essentially stolen from him. Rav Sheshet doesn't view gambling as an *asmachta*, but he argues that the problem with gambling is that one who spends his or her time doing it does not contribute to society in any way. Gambling once does not really pose a problem, and we see that if you do it along with an occupation that does contribute to society, it is permissible. Gambling seems to be frowned upon, however, by most rabbis, continuing through the Rishonim and Acharonim. However, there are two kinds of gambling that are generally accepted. Rav Moshe Sternbuch says that if you are playing to gain money that you will give to *tzedakah*, then gambling is fine. *Nitei Gavriel* in the Laws of Chanukah says that it is acceptable to gamble if you are playing with a small amount of money in a casual setting, in the spirit of the holiday.

Not only is gambling permissible on Chanukah; it is indeed important and holds a specific significance to the holiday itself. Essentially, the Hebrew letters printed on the dreidel each have a special meaning and evoke the idea of Torah learning. The nun, shin, gimmel, and hei signify the classic statement "*Neis gadol haya sham*," or "a great miracle happened there." Also, according to the *Bnei Yissaschar*, each letter represents a different side of the human ability: *gufani*, *nafshi*, *sichli*, and an all inclusive *hakol*, meaning "bodily, spiritual, mental, and everything."

Furthermore, the gematria of all the

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Days of Eight

Jonathan Beretz '18

We have generally taken for granted the fact that Chanukah lasts for eight days, assuming that it is due to the length of time of the miracle of the oil. That's all there is to it; no questions; no deeper meaning. Or is there something more? The Gemara in Masechet Shabbat Daf 21b asks, "מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן בכה בכסליו" —What is Chanukah?" The Talmud begins its response by saying that the rabbis taught that "the days of Chanukah are eight." What could this phrase possibly mean? Why would the Gemara not just say simply that there are eight days of Chanukah, without using the strange syntax? The fact that it says "days of eight" and not "eight days" shows that we are actually focusing on the quality of these days, rather than the quantity of them.

Everybody knows that the eight days of Chanukah correspond to the length of time that the oil remained lit. However, the deeper question here is why Hashem didn't make the oil last even longer. What is the extra layer of symbolism behind the number of days that the oil lasted?

The Greeks in the time of this miracle were very focused on the reality of the world. Seven was symbolic of the cycle of the world, which would repeat time and time again. They believed that humans operated within a framework that creates a natural boundary for even the most perfect description of reality. This is the reason that Hashem made the oil last for eight days: to go one step beyond the Greeks and show them the value of the number eight.

If we take a deeper look into the meaning and spelling of the word "eight" in Hebrew, we can learn something. The word for eight is "שמונה." If we are to take these letters and scramble them around,

the words *neshaam*, soul, as well as *Mishna*, our book of oral tradition, can be formed. Additionally, if we take off the last letter of *shemona*, we get the word "שמן," which by no coincidence means "oil."

We can learn a simple but powerful message from the significance of the word "eight." The days of Chanukah are more than just a number, but rather a description. Every day is a "day of eight," a day in which we recognize

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Chanukah Pride

Naomi Freilich '18

A central theme and message of both the story and holiday of Chanukah is the pride that we should have in our Jewish identities, especially in times when outside culture is extremely pervasive. The story of Chanukah, for example, took place in a time when the surrounding Hellenistic culture was pushed onto many. Throughout the Book of Maccabees, the ideas of preserving one's Judaism and standing up for one's beliefs are explored. When the Greek soldiers arrive in Modi'in, they command the Jewish people to sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. Mattathias, a kohen, responds, "I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers" (Book of Maccabees I, 2:20). In other words, Mattathias explicitly dismisses the command of the powerful and unforgiving Greek soldiers. Through his brave refusal to sacrifice to the Greek gods and refusal to accept the doctrines of the Greeks, Mattathias is able to protect his Jewish beliefs and values and conserve them for future generations. Mattathias comes to show us the difficulty in standing up for one's beliefs, as well as how important it is to stay true to oneself. It is very fitting, therefore, that the halachot of Chanukah not only relate to our honor and pride in our own Judaism, but also pertain to

our exhibition of our Judaism to others.

In Masechet Shabbat, on Daf 23b, Rava asks a difficult question pertaining to Chanukah, "נר חנוכה וקידוש היום: מהו? קידוש. היום עדיף דתדיר, או דילמא נר חנוכה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא— If one has the option of lighting candles for Chanukah or making Kiddush, which is preferred? Is Kiddush preferred because it is the most routine of the two, and do we say that the most frequent practice trumps the infrequent one? Or is it the mitzvah of lighting the candles that takes precedence, due to the component of publicizing the miracle that goes along with this mitzvah?"

Rava concludes by remarking that if a poor person has enough money for either wine for Kiddush or oil for a Chanukah lamp, the poor person should buy the oil for the Chanukah lamp because of the importance of publicizing the miracle, a principle known as "*pirsumei nisa*."

This conclusion highlights the importance of publicizing the miracle of both the military and holy victories of Chanukah, manifested in the lighting of the menorah. The mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah lamp



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documentary that is created as an end product. For my project, I interviewed my great aunt, my Aunt Ilsa. I was extremely lucky to have this opportunity, though in the beginning I did not realize quite how lucky I was. Unfortunately, not long after the interview, she was diagnosed with late stage cancer and died within the next three months just days after the premiere of the documentary, which she unfortunately was not able to attend.

When my mother first approached Aunt Ilsa to see if she was interested in being interviewed, she declined. Aunt Ilsa was worried she hadn't been educated enough to convey her message well. She was uncomfortable with public speaking, although she was the most proper, erudite person I have ever met, educated or not. Aunt Ilsa subsequently changed her mind, but not because of a changed perception of her own capabilities. Rather, her reason speaks to the type of person she was. She explained that she had changed her mind for one reason, and that reason was me. She worried that if I were to interview somebody other than her, I might be paired with survivors who would be less careful in how they told their stories. Aunt Ilsa didn't want me to be scared or traumatized in any way by the atrocities of the Holocaust; she was concerned only about me. She wanted to protect me, and for that she was willing to put her own desires second. Because of her selfless, kindhearted spirit, she agreed.

The truth is that Aunt Ilsa was one of the most thoughtful people I have ever met. I know it couldn't have been easy for her to relive such a difficult time in her life, let alone to allow me and my group members to document it. I so greatly appreciate her willingness to be a



part of the program for me, more than she will ever know. I gained so much from her participation in the project, and she taught me something that no one else could have. Aunt Ilsa taught me what real belief, real hope, and real courage are. If I could be half as strong as my Aunt Ilsa, I would be more than happy.

Aunt Ilsa was sent on the Kindertransport as a young teenager, separated from her entire family. She was younger than I am now when she left. My grandfather was too young to go on the Kindertransport, so she did not even have her brother to support her and keep her company. While she knew her parents' intentions were to keep her safe, at times she felt abandoned. My Aunt Ilsa was fueled by faith and hope, which carried her through the darkest part of her life. Her story inspires me to believe and to strive to be a better person in all aspects of my life. After hearing a story like hers, certain things fell into perspective. I have come to realize just how much I take for granted, and I hope to learn to be more appreciative of the people and things that I have in my life. Aunt Ilsa's experience taught me the definitions of true dedication, real courage, and bravery.

The strength that Aunt Ilsa showed when she was on her own in England is something I cannot even begin to fathom. She never gave up hope of reuniting with her family, and any time that she moved, she would always leave a forwarding address and phone number. I don't think that I would have had that degree of forethought. My aunt never gave up hope; she even continued to leave behind a way to locate her once the letters from her

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Chanukah Oil

Rebecca Araten, Editor, '18

Even if you choose to refrain from the greasy latkes and deliciously oleaginous jelly doughnuts over the eight days of Chanukah, the commemoration of the oil that lasted will still surround you. R' Yehoshua ben Levi said in Masechet Shabbat, "All the oils are suitable for the Chanukah lamp, and olive oil is the most suitable of oils." Oil played a huge role in the miracle of the Beit HaMikdash and the lighting of the menorah, so it is only natural that R' Yehoshua should suggest that lighting with oil is ideal, but why is it that olive oil is the most prized of the oils? What does olive oil have that canola oil or sesame oil does not?

Abaye tells a story of Rava, his master, who, after hearing R' Yehoshua's statement, began to look for olive oil to do the mitzvah because he thought that its light was clearer. While this view of the purpose of olive oil may seem to be the most practical one, it is not actually the case, as Rava originally thought that sesame oil was ideal, because it burns for longer. In fact, olive oil seems to have been chosen as the model manner of performing the mitzvah because its being represents two very different yet intertwined ways of looking at Chanukah and Judaism as a whole. Indeed, the oil's brightness symbolizes a passion and unwaning devotion to our Judaism in the moment, while mefarshim tie olive oil to our past and our continuity. Rashi says that olive oil is the brightest, symbolizing the fact that we want our Judaism to have a power and strength to it, and not to just simply be there, unexciting and unimportant. Rather than use an oil that lasts for a long time with a dull and dwindling light, we pride

ourselves in being vibrant and active in our communities. It is not enough to simply exist as Jews; we should be actively undertaking tasks to strengthen our beliefs and our community.

At the same time, however, olive oil connects us to a long tradition of Judaism and Jewish survival. G-d's commandment to Moshe about the menorah seems to hint to this everlasting quality of the Jewish people. He says

” וְאַתָּה תְּצַוֶּה אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כְּתִיב--לְמָאוֹר: לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר, תָּמִיד.”
“You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly” (Exodus 27:20).

According to the *Baal HaTurim*, the word “כתיב” and its gematria, or numerical value, of 830, suggests the fact that the mitzvah of lighting the menorah will continue for that many years, during the periods of both the First and Second Temples. The word “maor,” according to *Rabbeinu Bahya*, suggests the third Beit Hamikdash and the fact that the mitzvah will continue then. In this way, olive oil embodies the endurance of us as Jews, as well as our commitment to the mitzvot. Not only did we perform the mitzvah, but it was one that stayed with us for years and years, and although we now perform it in a different way, the remembrance of the menorah is very much a part of our lives, as is the oil with which we light it.

Additionally, the olive oil reminds us of our past and perseverance, according to Rashi, in the simple manner by which it is produced. The oil used for the Beit HaMikdash had to be made

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from “beaten” olives, and the oil could not be used if it had just naturally flowed outward. The beating of the olives and the creation of oil in this manner bears an uncanny resemblance to Jewish history, which one must concede has been full of unrelenting burdens and thrashing. The Jews in Greece, who had to live through the oppressive regime of Antiochus, act as a paradigm of this phenomenon. However, despite all of the pain and suffering that the Jews endured, the Maccabees ensured survival, and they continued to withstand the pressure, just like the crushed olives that eventually turned into pure oil. The oil therefore epitomizes the Jewish struggle and reminds us of Jewish persistence.

Olive oil is clearly not just a means to lighting a menorah or to making our food as scrumptious as possible; in and of itself, it teaches us about the nature of the holiday. On

Chanukah we must remember the survival of the Jewish people as a nation, and we must celebrate our continued existence. At the same time, however, we must ensure that our “flame” is as pure and bright as ever, and that it doesn’t dwindle in the moment. Yes, Chanukah lasts for eight days, but that doesn’t mean that the holiday should become any less bright or precious over time, and neither should our passion or zeal for serving G-d through mitzvot.

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Hashem's reign over all others and the power he truly possesses. Each day of the holiday has numerous connections to our history as Jews and to our meta-physical existences. The number was not chosen arbitrarily or for no reason; every day was chosen specifically to add up to the number eight, and each day therefore deserves its own respect. As Chanukah approaches, we should make sure to celebrate each and every day as a miracle of its own and as a testament to the true greatness of Hashem.

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is one which not only communicates the miracles of Chanukah, but rather one which also broadcasts our Judaism to the public eye. Rashi writes in his commentary on Masechet Shabbat, Daf 21b, that one must place his lamp outside of his house in the courtyard to publicize the miracle, and even one who lives on a higher floor still must light in a window for the publicity of the miracle. The fact that even one who lives in a location where it is difficult to see the light from the menorah must light the lamp goes to show just how important the act of communicating the miracle of Chanukah and our heritage is. The purpose of lighting the chanukiah is not merely to remind ourselves of the miracles that occurred, but also to share our Judaism with the rest of the world.

The halachot of Chanukah have broader implications for our lives in the 21st century and can teach us about how we should preserve our Judaism and exhibit it to others positively. The halachot of Chanukah provide a basis for reflection on how we present ourselves to others as Jewish people and how we must stay true to our beliefs, even in times when doing so is difficult.

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letters on the dreidel is the same as the gematria for the word "Mashiach". Despite its late introduction to the Jewish tradition and its seeming connection to gambling, the dreidel has essentially become an all-encompassing object of our Jewish identity and should be seen as more than a spinning top made out of clay or plastic. The dreidel keeps us in the light holiday spirit, while reminding us about the deeper and more philosophical tenets of our belief, including Torah learning, the coming of the Mashiach, and the aspects of our beings.



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miraculous enduring illumination is important, but it seems odd and contrary to many Jewish beliefs to rank this as more important than all the lives saved and the battle won.

The resolution to this seeming contradiction can be found in Mishlei 24:17, which says, “בְּנֹפֵל אֹיְבִיךָ אֹיְבִיךָ אֲלֵ-תִשְׂמַח וּבִקְשָׁלוֹ אֲלֵ-יִגַּל לְבָרְךָ” - When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, let your heart not exult.” Many commentators use this pasuk to explain the custom of removing a drop of wine for each plague at the Passover seder, the reasoning for this being that we cannot be fully happy when our joy comes at the expense of another's pain. This verse can therefore function as an explanation of why we don't celebrate the military victory on Chanukah: we don't glorify killing and destruction, and therefore we commemorate the oil instead, which perhaps symbolizes the larger victory of the event. Furthermore, the military victory is no longer relevant; it was a relatively short-lived victory anyway, with the Jews soon becoming conquered, the Beit Hamikdash experiencing destruction, and the nation going into exile. In contrast, the lasting of the oil was a perhaps more applicable and timeless miracle.

This pasuk seems to give us part of an explanation, but still not a complete one. I think that in order to fully understand Chanukah, the last holiday that the rabbis of the Gemara added to our collection of Jewish holidays, we must compare it to the second-to-last holiday added: Purim. Chanukah and Purim can be seen as the two “modern” Jewish holidays, and they are related to each other in terms of what they teach us about modern Jewish life. The story of Purim is that of an exilic Jewish life, under the control of another nation. There, the heroes of the story are able to

save the Jews only by their intense acculturation. Esther, the classic heroine, is intermarried, while Mordechai becomes the king's second in command by the end of the story. This rise in involvement with the secular government represents the need of Jews to be in positions of power and influence even while under the control of other nations, as well as the necessity of advocating for themselves in order to be able to make a difference.

Chanukah, on the other hand, exists to present the other necessary aspect of Jewish life under another nation's rule: remaining Jewish. As important as it is to be in an influential position while under foreign governments, the miracles of Chanukah teach us how important it is to remain strongly connected to Judaism, just as the Maccabees made sure to do. These two holidays may seem to be dichotomous, but the rabbis, looking at modern life and speaking to a situation which is just as relevant (if not more so) today than ever, instituted these two holidays to teach us that both must come together in order for the Jews to survive in exile. Chanukah and Purim were instituted as the two modern Jewish holidays, added last and once times were changing, to ensure that these two models remain with the Jews and serve as yearly reminders.

This lesson is an important one for American Jewry, which should take political initiatives such as participating in AIPAC, becoming impactful in government, and influencing policy, while at the same time remaining both outwardly and inwardly committed to Judaism. We don't celebrate the military victory on Chanukah; we celebrate the oil lasting, the menorah in the Beit Hamikdash that kept burning, and the commitment and connection to Judaism

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parents stopped coming. All of her relentless hope and belief eventually led her to what she referred to as “her miracle from G-d.” It happened just by chance, if you can call it that. She was home from work one day, and on that day, she received the most important telephone call of her life. She was destined to have stayed home on that day to receive a call from a British soldier who met her parents and brother in a refugee camp after the war. The miracle was threefold. In an age before cell phones and answering machines, the fact that she was home for that call is a miracle in and of itself. The fact that the soldier returned to England, kept his word, and found her current contact number constitutes a second miracle, and beyond that it was a miracle that her immediate family had all survived the Holocaust.

Aunt Ilsa’s miracle seems just as impossible as does the miracle of Chanukah, which was similarly a threefold miracle. Not only were the Greeks unsuccessful in ending Judaism, but in a defiled Beit Hamikdash, which had been intended for destruction, the Maccabim managed to find one vial with one day’s worth of pure oil. Moreover, that vial lasted for eight days.

I felt so honored to document Aunt Ilsa’s story for the *Names Not Numbers* project. But for me, Aunt Ilsa’s story is so much more than a part of Jewish history it is my history. I was so proud to introduce Aunt Ilsa to my friends. They all liked her so much and really connected with her story and her as a person. As the amazing person that she was, she made everyone feel comfortable. She had the heart of a giant, and my friends, like me, saw her caring and genuine nature and truly became her friends. The nearly eighty-year age difference was

imperceptible. She was the loveliest person to be around, a truly great person, and someone to aspire to be. She had such an aura surrounding her that anytime she walked in a room, everyone’s faces lit up. Even my dog knew she was special and reacted to her in a kind. Aunt Ilsa just had a way with people that made everyone happy. The lights of our menorah now represent so much more than just the miracle of Chanukah. They are the miracle of the Jewish people, but they are also the miracle of my family. They are communal, yet they are so personally significant. They are my Aunt Ilsa; she still lights up a room.



that remained alive and could not be destroyed by any outside influence.

**This publication is dedicated
in loving memory of our
parents and grandparents**