

8 NIGHTS OF REFLECTION

Finding new layers of meaning in Hanukah with Pardes North America



Embracing Small Moments

Introduction

Hanukah is, in part, a recognition of the power of one small moment, as described in the Talmudic Tractate Shabbat 21b. This central source serves as the connection between Hanukah and the miracle of the oil lasting eight days. If we dig deeper, this text also reveals lessons that serve as powerful reminders for our lives today:

What is [the origin of the holiday of] Hanukah?... When the Syrian Greeks entered the sanctuary [of the Temple] they defiled all the oils that were [used to light the Temple Menorah]. And when the [Maccabees] overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one flask of oil [that was uncontaminated], and there was only enough oil there to light for one day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the Menorah] from it for eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of gratitude in prayer and blessings.

מאי חנוכה? ... שְׁשָׁנְכֶסוּ יוֹנִים
לְהִיכֵל טְמֵאוֹ כָּל הַשְּׁמֵנִים שְׁבֵהִיכֵל.
וְכִשְׁנִבְרָה מְלָכוֹת בֵּית חֲשֵׁמוֹנָי
וְנִצְחוּם, בְּדָקוּ וְלֹא מָצְאוּ אֶלָּא פֶּךָ אֶחָד
שֶׁל שֶׁמֶן... וְלֹא הָיָה בּוֹ אֶלָּא לְהַדְלִיק
יוֹם אֶחָד. נִעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ גַם וְהַדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ
שְׁמוֹנֶה יָמִים. לְשָׁנָה אַחֲרַת קִבְעוּם
וְעָשׂוּם יָמִים טוֹבִים בְּהִלָּל וְהוֹדָאָה.

In a world plagued by darkness, it was one small jar of oil that made an immediate and lasting imprint for how we commemorate this moment in our Jewish history. **This year, Pardes North America is embracing this theme by infusing every night of Hanukah with small, jar-sized Torah to add an additional layer of intention (kavanah) to this nightly ritual.** For each night, this guide presents one Hanukah related text and some interpretation for you to enjoy on your own, or with friends and family to add depth, meaning and relevance to the holiday. Hanukah is not just about the past; we light in order to remind ourselves that one small act can bring the light and change that is needed today.

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NIGHT 1: PRESSING PAUSE

Study

This list of legalistic restrictions hints at the power of taking a pause in our lives and an often overlooked way that women have added depth to the way we experience Hanukah:

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 670:1

Rav Joseph Karo (1565, Venice)

אורח חיים תע"א

On the 25th of Kislev the eight days of Hanukah begin, and one is prohibited for eulogizing and fasting, but one is permitted for doing work. Women have made it a custom not to do work while the candles are burning...

בכ"ה בכסליו (מתחילים) שמונת ימי חנוכה
ואסורים בהספד ותענית אבל מותרין
בעשיית מלאכה ונוהגות הנשים שלא
לעשות מלאכה בעוד שהנרות דולקות...

Discuss

Hanukah is a time where we are meant to carve out space for unbridled joy. According to this text, we should avoid activities, like eulogizing or fasting, that might limit our joy on Hanukah. However this text teaches that women chose to further elevate this holiday, by taking a break from engaging in any work related tasks while the Hanukah candles were burning. What new quality do you think this additional custom brings to the ritual of lighting the hanukiah?

Reflect

The theme for tonight's candles is about carving out intentional space. The women in our text have modeled this practice of creating meaningful boundaries in order to fully experience special or joyous moments. In a world with nonstop distraction, external pressures, and our own internal anxieties; Hanukah reminds us that we have the ability to press pause. To be human beings instead of "humans doing." As you watch your candles burn, consider following the path these sage women have paved for us by simply pausing to appreciate the glowing stillness. Are there areas in your life where you wish you could carve out more intentional space? What small step could you take towards making that happen?

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NIGHT 2: GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Study

Hidur Mitzvah - the act of beautifying a ritual commandment, is a core theme that permeates throughout the Jewish holidays. In Jewish tradition, those who creatively enhance a ritual obligation are praised because in doing so, they make that ritual feel even more memorable and significant:

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Hanukah 4:1

Maimonides (1138–1204), Spain & Egypt

How many [hanukiot] should one light on Hanukah? The commandment is that one hanukiah should be lit in each and every home, whether it be a home with many people or a home with a single person. One who desires to add more beauty to how they perform this commandment should light according to the number of people in the house — a hanukiah for each and every person, whether they are men or women. One who enhances [it] further than this and performs the commandment in the most ideal manner, lights a hanukiah for each person on the first night and continues to add one hanukiah on each and every night.

משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ד:א'

(א) כמה נרות הוא מדליק בחנכה. מצותה שיהיה כל בית ובית מדליק נר אחד בין שהיו אנשי הבית מרבין בין שלא היה בו אלא אדם אחד. והמהדר את המצוה מדליק נרות כמנין אנשי הבית נר לכל אחד ואחד בין אנשים בין נשים. והמהדר יותר על זה ועושה מצוה מן המבחר מדליק נר לכל אחד בלילה הראשון ומוסיף והולך בכל לילה ולילה נר אחד.

Discuss

This text plays with the question of how much effort is enough. In the first half of the text, Maimonides lays out the minimum requirement that every single person, whether they live alone or with others, lights at least one hanukiah. In the second half, he stresses ways one can surpass expectations in order to beautify the experience of lighting the candles on Hanukah by having many hanukiot lit.

- What might the value be in going beyond the call of duty when it comes to religious practice and other areas of our personal lives?
- What lesson might this text be trying to teach us when it highlights the importance of having at least one hanukiah for each and every person in the household?

Reflect

Maimonides reminds us of something that seems obvious but is often hard to do: to really honor the unique light that emerges from each and every person. It is so easy to fail to really see others because we are so focused on the responsibilities and burdens in our own lives. Or because we struggle to see

people for who they really are because our view is obfuscated by the lens of past events, or by the boxes we have placed others in that no longer don't fit. In these moments, our relationships can feel disconnected and out of alignment. Taking time to light one hanukiah for each and every person is a tool that helps us to continue to work hard to see the unique light that is within each of us. As you light your hanukiah tonight, think about those who are most important to you and try to see more deeply and more clearly how each of these people have a unique light within them and what you might do to better recognize or nurture it.

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NIGHT 3: SHARING OUR VALUES

Study

Today, social media allows us to share more about our lives, our values and our politics than ever before. Sometimes we share out of joy, sometimes out of social pressure. And many of us feel the need to carefully curate what we share in ways that can make our public persona feel disconnected from reality and our true selves. In this text, Maimonides offers us a new perspective on the role of public proclamations:

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Hanukah 4:7

Maimonides (1138–1204), Spain & Egypt

It is a mitzvah (commandment) to place the hanukiah at the outside entrance of one's house ... so that the mezuzah will be to the right and the hanukiah to the left. And if one lives in an attic, they should place it in the window that faces the public domain. One who has placed the hanukiah above twenty *Amot** has not done anything, because it is not recognizable.

** An Amah is a unit of measurement. One Amah is approximately equal to 1.5 ft.*

משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ד'ז'

(ז) גר חֲנֻכָּה מְצִוָּה לְהַנִּיחוֹ עַל פֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ מִבְּחוּץ ... כְּדֵי שֶׁתִּהְיֶה מְזוּזָה מִיְמִין וְגַר חֲנֻכָּה מִשְּׂמאל. וְאִם הָיָה דָר בְּעֵלְיָהּ מְנִיחוֹ בַּחלּוֹן הַסְּמוּכָה לְרֵשׁוֹת הָרֵבִים. וְגַר חֲנֻכָּה שֶׁהִנִּיחוֹ לַמַּעֲלָה מַעֲשָׂרִים אַמָּה לֹא עָשָׂה כְּלוּם לְפִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ נִכָּר:

Discuss

One of the core tenets of Hanukah is that of *Pirsumei Nisah* - the act of proudly and publicly declaring the miracle that took place at this moment in Jewish history. Here Maimonides suggests that we be intentional about where we place and light the hanukiah. By placing it in a doorway or window, we ensure that the miracle of Hanukah will be recognized and felt by all who pass by.

- Knowing that the goal of the mitzvah is *Pirsumei Nisa* (to publicize the miracle), why would placing it higher than 20 *Amot* (approximately 32 ft) be problematic?
- Imagine walking through a doorway with a lit hanukiah on your left, and a Mezuzah on your right. What message or signal might you perceive walking into such a home?

Reflect

The hanukiah and the mezuzah serve as two symbols that frame the entrance to the home and the transition from public to private space. The hanukiah stands as a reminder of hope after trauma, while the mezuzah symbolizes our commitment to something larger than ourselves. These items serve not just as passing tokens, but as the principles one should expect will be reflected within the privacy of one's home. It is a sharing that encourages a deeper reflection. Tonight as you light your hanukiah,

consider what morals or values you might want hanging on your doorpost as a reminder to yourself and others of what you truly stand for.

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NIGHT 4: THE DOORPOST OR THE TABLE

Study

Last night's reflection focused on the importance of proudly and publicly sharing our values and our identity with the world. But what happens when it may not be safe to be so public? In this Talmudic excerpt, we see the sages wrestle with the ever present threat that came with trying to live openly as a religious minority:

Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Shabbat 21b

שבת כ"א ב

The Sages taught: It is a mitzvah (commandment) to place the hanukiah at the entrance to one's house on the outside [of the doorpost]. If one lives upstairs, one should place [the hanukiah] at the window [facing out towards] the public domain. And in a time of danger, one places [the hanukiah] on the table and that is sufficient to fulfill the mitzvah.

תנו רבנן: גר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ. אם היה דר בעלייה — מניחה בַּחֲלוֹן הַסְּמוּכָה לְרִשּׁוֹת הָרַבִּים. וּבְשַׁעַת הַסְּכָנָה — מְנִיחָה עַל שֻׁלְחָנוֹ וְדִיּוֹ.

Discuss

In times of real or perceived danger, we are encouraged to take the necessary precautions to protect ourselves. While ideally, we should be able to celebrate Hanukah and our identity proudly, the Sages recognize that there are times that this would not be safe.

- What do we learn from the fact that putting the hanukiah on the table is not phrased as a suggestion, but as a directive?
- Why do you think the sages suggest that one still light the hanukiah on the table instead of not lighting it at all?

Reflect

Like the sages of our Talmud, Jews today in America and across the globe are still aware that anti-semitism exists. The sages in this text explore the tension of yearning to stand proudly as one's full self in the face of oppression and the simultaneous need to feel safe and protected. Yet, despite the looming danger, the sages never suggest fully extinguishing the hanukiah candles. Instead, they understood the powerful symbolism those lights hold, especially in moments of darkness. So as you light the candles, be it by the doorpost, the window, or the table, consider how this small act of keeping the lights lit serves as a defiant expression of hope, perseverance and bravery.

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NIGHT 5: SHALOM BAYIT - PEACE IN THE HOME

Study

The hardest expectations to meet are often those we set for ourselves. How often do we tell ourselves we need to be perfect - a perfect friend, a perfect parent, or a perfect professional? This text both reminds us that real life is rarely that simple and offers us a powerful way to handle life's limitations with grace and compassion:

Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Shabbat 23b

Rava said: It is obvious to me [that when a person] must choose between purchasing oil to light Shabbat candles or purchasing oil to light a hanukiah, the Shabbat candles take precedence. That is due to Shalom Bayit (peace in the home). [The less obvious question is what happens if there is a conflict between buying oil needed to] light Shabbat candles and buying wine to use for kiddush on Shabbat day. [In this situation,] the Shabbat candles take precedence, due to shalom bayit. However, Rava raised a dilemma: [What happens when one must choose between buying] oil for a hanukiah or wine for kiddush on Shabbat day, what is the ruling in that case? Does kiddush take priority because it is frequent [i.e., it is performed every week and is therefore an established practice that should take precedence]? Or, perhaps the hanukiah takes precedence due to the need to publicize the miracle? After he raised the dilemma, [Rava then resolved it and ruled that] the hanukiah takes precedence due to the need to publicize the miracle.

שבת כ"ג ב

אמר רבא: פשיטא לי, גר
ביתו וגר חנוכה — גר
ביתו עדיף, משום שלום
ביתו. גר ביתו וקידוש היום
— גר ביתו עדיף, משום
שלום ביתו. בעי רבא: גר
חנוכה וקידוש היום מהו?
קידוש היום עדיף —
דתדיר, או דילמא גר
חנוכה עדיף — משום
פרסומי ניסא? בתר
דבעיה, הדר פשטה: גר
חנוכה עדיף, משום
פרסומי ניסא.

Discuss

It is difficult when our personal limitations (financial or other) prevent us from living out our ideals. Our text describes a person whose financial constraints force them to choose between two things that both seem essential. In the first two cases, the principle of Shalom Bayit (peace in the home) is what guides the sages in their decision making. Rashi's (Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchaki; the most influential Biblical and Talmudic commentator) commentary on this text clarifies that the goal of Shalom Bayit is to maintain an equilibrium in the home and avoid the internal strife that could occur between family members as a result of essential needs not being met. In particular, he explains that one should buy oil for Shabbat candles over wine for Kiddush in order to avoid the conflict that could ensue if one was forced along

with their family to sit through a Friday night meal in the dark.

- How does this text inform your understanding of the importance of Shalom Bayit? What principles guide you in situations with limited choices?
- How might the notion of Shalom Bayit play a role in those decisions?

Reflect

The sages do not shy away from addressing the real life challenges people face when they simply do not have enough resources to do both things - purchase both wine and candles. Yet the sages bring a surprisingly gentle and human consciousness to the discussion by introducing the principle of Shalom Bayit (peace in the home). When resources are limited, the only way to keep peace in the home is to make it clear that basic necessities need to come first. By simplifying how one chooses between these seemingly competing needs, the sages show compassion demonstrating how they really see and understand the challenges people face. Without judgement, the Sages offer guidance here that clarifies that the primary mitzvah in this situation is subsistence.

Today, we realize that the limit on resources is not just about limited money. It's also about the endless amounts of responsibility we bear with limited time, limited strength and limited emotional capacity. Especially after enduring the recent pandemic, so many of us are constantly being forced to choose between a myriad of obligations that all feel required and that often feel beyond the scope of our personal resources. As you light your hanukiah, consider letting the principle of Shalom Bayit and the gentleness of the sages guide you by putting down some of the weight you might be carrying in favor of the peace that can come from self compassion.

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NIGHT 6: ILLUMINATING THE DIVINE

Study

The Torah never really tells us much of the backstory of Abraham; he just seems to appear out of thin air in Genesis chapter eleven. This leaves us with questions like, why did he deserve to be the father of the Jewish people? This narrative gap allows for a flurry of rabbinic commentary to complete the picture of who is Abraham:

Genesis Rabbah 39

בראשית רבה ל"ט

G-d said to Abram, "Go forth from your land..." (Genesis 12:1)... Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to one who was traveling from place to place when they saw a castle ***doleket (aglow)**. They ask themselves, "Is it possible that this castle lacks a master to look after it?" The owner of the building looked out and said to them, "I am the master of the castle." So too what happened with Abraham, our father, was similar. He said, "Is it possible that this universe lacks a master to look after it?" the Holy Blessed One looked at him and said, "I am the Master of the Universe."

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך מארצך וגו' (בראשית יב, א)... אמר רבי יצחק מנשל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת, אמר תאמר שהבירה הזו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה. כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

**There are different translations offered on the use of hebrew word "דולקת/doleket" in this text. Some translate it as the palace being filled with light, while others suggest it signifies the palace is actually "on fire".*

Discuss

How we choose to translate the word "doleket" (as either "aglow" or "on fire") can lead to two very different understandings of this parable. The first translation that the palace was "aglow" or "full of light," feels more intuitive. This parable describes the moment Abraham was inspired to recognize G-d's presence in this world as the force responsible for "keeping the lights on" so to speak. However, the second translation is somewhat murkier. If we understand the translation as "the palace was on fire," it recasts Abraham's subsequent question as an accusation: How could the owner of this castle or universe be so careless as to leave it unattended and burning? Thus, this text goes beyond simply recognizing G-d's presence, but reconciling that awareness with the strife we see in our world. Instead it becomes a parable about the beginning of Abraham's own journey as G-d's partner in putting out the

fire. Which of these translations and understandings of the parable feels most intuitive to you and why?

Reflect

Fire is the most quintessential physical representation of G-d in the Tanach. It conjures up images of the burning bush, the fiery pillar that protects the Hebrew slaves from approaching armies of Pharaoh, and the fire that consumes Mount Sinai at revelation. But why is fire such a powerful metaphor for God? Fire is something that is intangible yet powerful. It has the power to bring warmth and light; but also to consume and destroy. Fire is something we are attracted to and also afraid of. In this way, its contradictions and complexity make it a perfect metaphor for how our ancestors experienced God.

In reading this text, it is easy to imagine that a palace on fire would be impossible to ignore. And yet, how many people came before Abraham that passed by that burning palace and failed to notice the blazing sign in front of them? Ultimately it took a seeker like Abraham, someone with his unique spiritual gifts to finally see the presence of the Divine that was there all along. This text suggests that part of what made Abraham special was his ability to notice what others overlooked. As you watch your candles burn, consider the people, the moments and spaces where we may need to pay more attention in order to see the blessings and the holiness that may be hidden in plain sight.

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NIGHT 7: FINDING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Study

We are living in times that for many of us are more difficult and challenging than any we can remember. In these moments, it is easy to feel hopeless, to feel like the problems are so intractable that we don't even know where to begin to try to address them. The story below tells of the first Hanukah that Adam and Eve shared and provides an insightful message for how to fight the darkness in our world:

Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Avodah Zarah 8a

עבודה זרה ח' א

The Sages taught: When Adam the first human saw that the day was progressively getting shorter, he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and returning to [the primordial state of] chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven. He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer. Once he saw that the winter season of Tevet came around, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening, he said: This is the natural order of the world. He went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he observed both these [eight days on which he had fasted in the previous year], and these [eight days of his celebration], as days of festivities.

ת"ר לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך אמר אי לי שמא בשביל שסרחתי עולם חשך בעדי וחוזר לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענית [ובתפלה] כיון שראה תקופת טבת וראה יום שמאריך והולך אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים לשנה האחרת עשאו לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים

Discuss

Notice the amazing psychological imagination and insight of the text. The rabbis imagine what it must have felt like for Adam and Eve to live through the first fall headed into winter. It must have been terrifying; the days getting shorter, the air chilling, abundance of fresh vegetation departing before their eyes. It isn't surprising they assumed the world was ending. In a moment of egocentricity that rings so true of how many of us react to adversity, Adam immediately looks for a reason for this change in the world and assumes that he is to blame; that he is the central figure in the story. The text is intentional about the steps that follow: First, Adam fasts, prays and laments what is happening. Only after taking time to acknowledge and tend to his fear and dismay, can Adam rise and begin to do something to fight the darkness. And what does he do? What is the antidote to the moment in time where we are faced with so many difficult challenges and so many things going wrong? The answer to the darkness is to kindle the lights of the first Hanukah.

Reflect

- Where are the spaces in your life today where you are still stuck in the stage of acknowledging and attending to your own fear, dismay and hopelessness?
- Where are the spaces, relationships and issues in our world today where you might have the strength to fight that darkness by becoming a creator of light?

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NIGHT 8: "BIZMAN HAZEH" - IN THIS TIME

Study

There is power in speech. G-d creates with speech. Words can transform us in key moments like when taking the oath of citizenship or reciting the wedding formula that binds us to another. In our tradition, that power of speech is also manifested through a berakha (a blessing). Below are the three berakhot (blessings) one is meant to recite when one lights a hanukiah, that highlight the way words are not simply static on a page, but can move us to a state of living more mindfully:

Hanukah Berakhot

ברכת חנוכה

1. Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, who has blessed us with Their commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Hanukah light.

1. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר
חֲנֻכָּה

2. Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, [and] in this time.

2. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנֵן
הַזֶּה

3. *Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.

3. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁחַיָּינוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנֵן הַזֶּה

**Note this third berakha is only said on the first night. Subsequently only the first berakhot are said when lighting the hanukiah.*

Discuss

Part of the beauty of Jewish text study is exploring the ambiguities, contradictions and gaps that call out to be interpreted by the reader. It is the process of filling in these spaces that makes room for new understandings, new voices and meaning. This is certainly the case when it comes to the second berakha we recite when lighting the Hanukah candles. This berakha has a curious ending. After acknowledging G-d for the miracles performed, it ends with "בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנֵן הַזֶּה" - "in those days in this time." What exactly is this phrase trying to communicate? One could understand it as simply thanking G-d for the miracles performed for our ancestors that took place at this time of the year long ago. However one could also read this line as having a comma: "בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם, בְּזִמְנֵן הַזֶּה" - "in those days, in this

time," implying that Hanukah is not just about expressing gratitude for past miracles, but also for honing our ability to acknowledge and appreciate the miracles that are occurring today as well. How does this second interpretation of berakha #2 fit with the theme of the third shehechyanu blessing we recite on the first day?

Reflect

We often think about berakhot as things that we are proscribed to do for the sake of ritual, such as before and after eating or for lighting Shabbat candles. However, it serves an additional purpose as well. It has the ability to kindle our mindfulness and sense of appreciation for the things around us. It serves as a spiritual technology to reorient us to a state of gratitude and awareness. Throughout Hanukah, there are so many tools we are given to spark that sense of appreciation and connection to the gifts we have been given. We have songs, food, games and candles to do this. But we also have these berakhot as a final tool to remind us to focus on the good things we have and on the miracles that brighten our lives. So as we say the final berakhot on the candles, consider pausing to allow the gratitude that comes from all the blessings in our lives to wash over us and warm us during this last festival night.