

# 1. LET THERE BE LIGHT

Hanukkah always begins on 25 Kislev in the Hebrew calendar... but not always on 25 December, Christmas day, in the Gregorian calendar. A year of two 25s is unusual, a parallel that hasn't happened since 2005 and won't happen again until 2035.

Twenty-five is a powerful number in Jewish thought. It is the value of the word *yehi* (יהי), the first word God speaks in the Torah, a word that plays an indispensable role in the creation of light. God says *yehi or*: let there be light. This light was not celestial, Rashi explains. It was a different kind of light, separated from darkness and described as "good." The Sages of the Talmud refer to it as *or ganuz*, a "hidden light" withheld from the wicked, shining only upon the righteous.

### רש"י על בראשית א' ג-ד

ויאמר אלקים יהי אור ויהי־אור. וירא אלקים את־האור כי־טוב ויבדל אלקים בין האור ובין החשך. אף בזה אנו צריכין לדברי אגדה, ראהו שאינו כדאי להשתמש בו רשעים, והבדילו לצדיקים לעתיד לבא (חגיגה י"ב א).

### Rashi on Genesis 1:3-4

**God said: Let there be light and there was light. God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness.**

Here too we must depend upon the statement of the Aggadah: God saw that the wicked were unworthy of using the light and therefore set it apart, reserving it for the righteous in the future to come (Chagigah 12a).

### חגיגה י"ב א

דאמר רבי אלעזר: אור שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא ביום ראשון, אדם צופה בו מסוף העולם ועד סופו. כיון שנסתכל הקדוש ברוך הוא בדור המבול ובדור הפלגה וראה שמעשיהם מקולקלים – עמד וגנזו מהן. ולמי גנזו – לצדיקים לעתיד לבא, שנאמר: "וירא אלהים את האור כי טוב" (בראשית א:ד), ואין "טוב" אלא צדיק.

### Chagigah 12a

Rabbi Elazar said: The light that the Holy One, Blessed be God, created on the first day [was a different kind of light] through which humankind could see from one end of the world to the other. But when the Holy One, Blessed be God, looked upon the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion and saw that their ways were corrupt [and that they might misuse this light for evil] God arose and concealed it from them. And for whom did God conceal it? For the righteous ones in the future, as it is stated: "And God saw the light, that it was good" (Genesis 1:4). "Good" refers to none [other than the] righteous.

### שפת אמת, בראשית לחנוכה ג:ד

וע"י הנרות יכולין למצוא הארה הגנוזה בימים אלו, שזה ענין המצות: להאיר, למצוא על ידן, אור הגנוז בעוה"ז.

### Sfat Emet, Genesis for Hanukkah 3:4

Through the lights [of Hanukkah] we can find the Hidden Light in these days, and this is the point of the mitzvot: to illuminate, to find through them the Hidden Light in this world.

This year, as 25 Kislev and 25 December coincide, we have double the incentive to embrace the power of *yehi* as we let there be light. Together we share an opportunity to look deeper into the first light of Hanukkah, to see and feel the hidden light within its glow, and to draw that righteousness into our lives, even at the darkest of times.

▶ **What is a "hidden light" within you that you can share more freely in the year to come?**

▶ **Share an act of righteousness that has inspired you in the face of the darkness of October 7 and the ongoing war.**



## 2. PUBLICIZE THE MIRACLE

The mitzvah of פרסומי ניסא (*pirsumei nisa* - publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah) calls us to light the *hanukkiah* where it can illuminate not just our homes but the broader world. In times of danger, however, Jewish tradition allows us to adapt, lighting the *hanukkiah* privately, ensuring the miracle endures even when visibility feels unsafe. This flexibility underscores the resilience and strength that have defined the Jewish people throughout history.

### משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ד'ז-ח

נר חנכה מצוה להניחו על פתח ביתו מבחוץ בטפח הסמוך לפתח על שמאל הנכנס לבית כדי שתהיה מזוזה מימין ונר חנכה משמאל.

ואם היה דר בעליה מניחו בחלון הסמוכה לרשות הרבים. ונר חנכה שהניחו למעלה מעשרים אמה לא עשה כלום לפי שאינו נכר:

בימי הסכנה מניח אדם נר חנכה בתוך ביתו מבפנים ואפלו הניחו על שלחנו דיו.

### Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah and Hanukkah 4:7-8

It is a mitzvah to place the Hanukkah lamp at the outside of the entrance to one's home, within the handbreadth that is closest to the doorway on the left side as one enters the home, so that the mezuzah will be on the right and the Hanukkah lamp on the left.

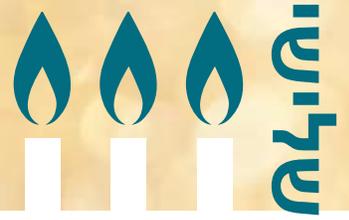
When one lives in a second storey apartment, one should place [the Hanukkah lamp] in a window close to the public domain. If one places a Hanukkah lamp more than twenty cubits [above the ground], one's actions are of no consequence because [the lamp] does not attract attention [at that height].

In a time of danger, one may place a Hanukkah lamp inside one's home; even if one lights it on the table, it is sufficient.

Since October 7, being visibly Jewish has felt perilous for many. In Israel, war brings daily danger, while outside of Israel, rising antisemitism creates fear in expressing Jewish identity publicly. Yet Hanukkah reminds us that light shines brightest in darkness. As we navigate these challenges, we must celebrate our strength, honor our traditions, and remain steadfast in our commitment to the survival of Israel and the Jewish people. Tonight, as you light the *hanukkiah*, hold in your heart the millions of Jews around the world creating light amidst the darkness. The miracle of Hanukkah burns as brightly today as it did two thousand years ago. We are still here.

► **How has October 7 impacted your Jewish identity? Share something that makes you grateful to be Jewish during this challenging time.**

► **What are some ways your family can create light, not just with the *hanukkiah* but through your actions and values, during a time when being Jewish feels especially challenging?**



### 3. SHABBAT

In a compelling teaching from the Kedushat Levi, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev (1740–1809, Ukraine) compares the act of placing (*hanachah*) the Hanukkah lights with the act of kindling (*hitlahavut*) them. The grounding or placement of Hanukkah light, he argues, allows our love and passion for God to find rest in a “vessel.” This placement transforms raw spiritual energy into meaningful and sustainable divine service. Shabbat rest (*menucha*) provides a similar “vessel” for our spiritual energies. Shabbat gives us a weekly opportunity to channel the chaos and activity of the week into a sanctified and restful state where our connection to God is deepened and stabilized.

#### קדושת לוי, בראשית, דרשות לחנוכה: ט

אמרו רבותינו ז"ל (שבת כב): הדלקה עושה מצוה, רצה לומר שאדם יתלהב לעבודתו וזהו הדלקה ולפי שבהתלהבות יש שמתלהב לדברים בטלים והצדיק שמתלהב רק לקדושה זהו נקרא הנחה דמנוחה נקרא הכלי שמכניס בו האהבה שבהכנסתה לכלי יש מנוחה לאהבה ששורה בדבר. וזהו מאן דאמר הנחה עושה מצוה, שיהא להדלקה הנחה שיכנוס האהבה בכלי שיתלהב לעבודתו ולזה רמזו חכמי האמת דהנחה הוא מדת מלכות דעל ידי שממליך להבורא על זה ההתלהבות יש לו מנוחה בעבודת בורא ברוך הוא:

#### Kedushat Levi, Genesis, Homilies for Hanukkah: 9

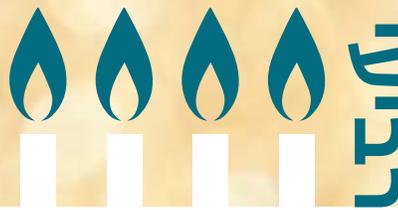
Our Rabbis z”l said (Shabbat 22b): “The kindling fulfills the mitzvah.” This means that a person should ignite a passion (*hitlahavut*) for divine service, and this is the essence of “kindling.” However, passion can sometimes be directed toward meaningless things, while the righteous channel their passion only toward holiness. This is referred to as “placing” (*hanachah*) which signifies rest and grounding. The vessel that contains love is called rest, for when love enters the vessel, it finds rest and dwells within it.

This is the meaning of the opinion that “placing fulfills the mitzvah” — that the kindling must include *hanachah*, the placement, grounding the love in a vessel so that one’s passion is directed toward divine service. The sages of truth hint that *hanachah* corresponds to the attribute of *malchut* (kingship). Through crowning the Creator with one’s passion and recognizing God’s kingship over that passion, one achieves true rest and alignment in the service of the Blessed Creator.

The Kedushat Levi reminds us that the active energy of Hanukkah, human initiative, must be accompanied by *hanachah*—a resting or grounding of that energy. When Hanukkah and Shabbat overlap, the message is heightened. The candles of Hanukkah represent our active participation in kindling divine light, while Shabbat reminds us to ground that light in a sanctified framework of rest (*menucha*). Together, they teach us that true spiritual service is not about unbridled passion or passive “thoughts and prayers,” but about channeling energy into a vessel where love and holiness can dwell.

▶ **The Kedushat Levi connects the process of channeling spiritual passion into a grounded vessel to the attribute of *malchut* (kingship). How does this concept inform your understanding of leadership and responsibility within Jewish thought?**

▶ **When technology and constant connectivity often blur the lines between work, rest, and spiritual practice, how can Jewish traditions like Hanukkah and Shabbat inspire practical strategies to create sacred boundaries in your daily life?**



# 4. HAVDALAH

A fascinating debate exists among the sages regarding the correct order for performing *Havdalah* and lighting for Hanukkah on *Motzei Shabbat*. The issue involves two competing halachic principles:

1. תדיר ושאינו תדיר, תדיר קודם (*tadir usheino tadir, tadir kodem* - more frequent mitzvot take precedence), which supports performing *Havdalah* first, and
2. תוספת שבת (*tosefet Shabbat* - prolonging the sanctity of Shabbat), which supports lighting Hanukkah candles first.

Additionally, the unique status of פרסומי ניסא (*pirsumei nisa* - publicizing the miracle) associated with the Hanukkah lights further complicates the debate.

Rema: All the more so at home where one kindles and afterward performs *Havdalah*, for *Havdalah* has already been performed in the synagogue.

The Shulchan Aruch states that in synagogues, Hanukkah candles should be lit before *Havdalah* to prioritize *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle. The Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles) adds that this order should also be followed at home.

While synagogue practice is settled, private observance continues to spark debate among later commentators. The Taz (1586-1667, Poland) argues for reciting *Havdalah* before lighting the Hanukkah candles at home, while the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797, Lithuania) supports the position of the Shulchan Aruch. Today, Sephardi authorities typically rule that *Havdalah* comes first, while the practice remains unresolved for Ashkenazim. The Mishnah Berurah suggests either practice is valid, advising individuals to consult their rabbi or follow family *minhag* (custom).

**שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים סימן תרפ"א:א-ב**

אין מבדילין בנר חנוכה במוצאי שבת  
 במוצאי שבת אין מבדילים בנר חנוכה שאין נהנים לאורו  
 ואין מברכין על הנר עד שיאותו לאורו:  
 מדליקין נר חנוכה בבית הכנסת קודם ההבדלה:  
 הגה וכל שכן בביתו שמדליק ואח"כ מבדיל שהרי כבר  
 הבדיל בבית הכנסת:

**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 681:1-2**

We do not perform *Havdalah* with the Hanukkah light after the Sabbath.

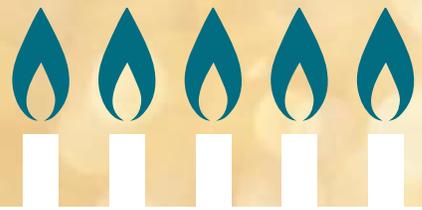
1. After the Sabbath we do not perform *Havdalah* with the Hanukkah light, for we may not derive pleasure from its illumination, and we do not recite the blessing over the [*Havdalah*] light until we bask in its illumination.
2. We kindle the Hanukkah light in the synagogue before *Havdalah*.



► **How do these competing halachic principles reveal broader values in Jewish law about balancing regular obligations with extraordinary opportunities for sanctity?**

► **How do you navigate the tension between preserving sacred, personal moments and the desire to share them publicly, especially on social media?**





# 5. JUDITH

The story of Judith, found in the apocryphal *Sefer Yehudit*, tells of a courageous Jewish widow who saves her people from the Assyrian general Holofernes. Judith infiltrates the enemy camp, gains Holofernes' trust, and serves him salted cheese, prompting him to drink copious amounts of wine. As he falls into a deep sleep, Judith seizes the moment and beheads him with his own sword. Her bold actions demoralize the Assyrian army, leading to their retreat and ensuring the survival of her community. Although not part of the Hanukkah narrative, Judith's story is linked to the holiday in various traditions, as her bravery and faith parallel the Maccabees' struggle against oppression. Consider the Ben Ish Hai (R. Yosef Haim, 1835-1909, Iraq):

### בן איש חי, הלכות שנה ראשונה, חנוכה כ"ד

אוכלין מאכלי חלב בחנוכה זכר לנס שנעשה בחלב שהאכילה יהודית את האויב שהיה ממלכי יון והמעשה הובא בספר חמדת הימים.

נס זה נעשה קודם נס העקרי של חנוכה בכמה שנים, אך הואיל ואותו אויב היה ממלכי יון וגם הוא היה רוצה להעבירם על דת לכך עושין לנס זה גם כן זכר בימי חנוכה.

ונראה לי בס"ד לרמוז טעם בחלב לשלשה מצות שגזרו לבטלם שהם חודש שבת מילה ומסרו ישראל עצמן עליהם:

דאות ח' דחלב הוא אות ראשונה של חודש

ואות ב' דחלב הוא אות שנית של שבת

ואות ל' דחלב הוא אות שלישי של מילה.

### Ben Ish Hai, Halachot 1st Year, Hanukkah 24

We eat dairy foods on Hanukkah in memory of the miracle that occurred through the milk that Judith fed to the enemy, who was one of the Grecian

kings, as is recounted in the book *Hemdat HaYamim*.

This miracle occurred some years before the chief miracle of Hanukkah, but since the enemy was also a Grecian king, and he also wanted to make the Jews abandon their religion, we also commemorate this miracle during the days of Hanukkah.

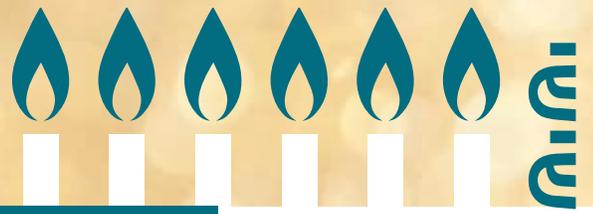
It seems to me, with God's help, that there is a hint in the word חלב (*chalav*, milk) that refers to the three mitzvot that the Greeks wanted to abolish, and over which the Jews were ready to sacrifice themselves:

The first letter, *chet*, refers to the first letter of *chodesh*, the calendar. The letter *bet* refers to the second letter of *Shabbat*. And the letter *lamed* refers to the third letter of *milah*, the covenant of circumcision that they were forced to abandon.

Here the Ben Ish Hai connects Judith's bravery and the broader spiritual resistance of the Jewish people to a custom of eating dairy on Hanukkah. He finds deeper meaning in the word *chalav* (milk), linking it to three mitzvot—*chodesh*, *Shabbat*, and *milah*—that are for him three pillars of Jewish identity. By commemorating both Judith's story and the struggle to preserve these mitzvot, the custom of eating dairy on Hanukkah becomes a powerful reminder of Jewish resilience and the spiritual triumph over forces that sought to erase religious practice and identity.

► Share the story of a Judith in your life, a woman who embodies courage, wisdom, and resourcefulness.

► What "three pillars" best define your Jewish identity?



## 6. DEDICATION & EDUCATION

We derive the word *Hanukkah* from the rededication of the Temple after the victory of the Maccabees against Seleucid forces in 168 BCE. In Hebrew, the word dedication (חנוכה) and the word education (חינוך) share a root (חנך). Consider the interplay between dedication and education in the following passage:

### עירובין נ"ד ב

רבי פרידא הוה ליה ההוא תלמידא דהוה תני ליה ארבע מאה זימני וגמר

ינמא חד בעיוה למלתא דמצוה

תנא ליה ולא גמר

אמר ליה האידנא מאי שנא

אמר ליה מדההיא שעתא דאמר ליה למר איכא מילתא דמצוה אסחאי לדעתאי וכל שעתא אמינא השתא קאי מר השתא קאי מר

אמר ליה הב דעתיך ואתני לך

הדר תנא ליה ארבע מאה זימני [אחריני].

### Eruvin 54b

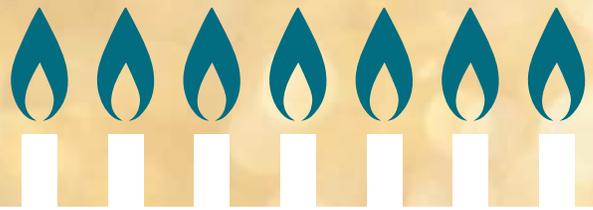
R. Perida had a student he had to teach 400 times before [the student] could complete the material. One day R. Perida's presence was requested for a mitzvah. So he taught his student [400 times] but the student did not complete the material. R. Perida said to him: What is different? His student said: From the time that they said to the Master that there is a mitzvah for which he is needed, my mind was distracted and every moment I thought: now the Master will get up [to go, and we will not complete the material].

R. Perida said to him: Pay attention this time and I will teach you.

He taught him again 400 times.

► **Bring to mind a teacher who illuminated your life. What has been the impact of their dedication to your education?**

► **What is a subject you have always wanted to learn, or one you are drawn to but struggle with? How might the dedication of R. Perida's student inspire you to begin or return to your learning?**



# 7. NEW YEAR'S EVE

The rhythms of Israel follow the Hebrew calendar, including the celebration of the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashanah. But Israel also pulses to a modern, Western beat, so New Year's Eve on the Gregorian calendar doesn't pass unnoticed. The day is known as Yom Sylvester after Pope Sylvester I, who died on December 31 after serving under Constantine from 314–335 CE. He was a known antisemite, infamous for prohibiting Jews from living in Jerusalem. The tension is clear. How can we celebrate a day with such a namesake?

It is worth considering a different approach, one that doesn't shy away from rooting the celebration of New Year's Eve in the 4th century, but champions wholly different 4th-century heroes. No two figures warrant this recognition more than Abaye (c. 280-337) and Rava (c. 280-352). As Ari Bergmann, Talmud professor at Yeshiva University, wrote:

**Tablet Magazine: "Abaye and Rava: How Two Babylonian Sages Started the Great Collective Conversation That Became the Talmud." (2022)**

In the Talmudic imagination, Abaye and Rava have long captured the essence of religious learning throughout the ages. It was largely due to the efforts of these two Babylonian rabbis that students of the Talmud began to study a single curriculum and a unified body of traditions, rather than the particular teachings of specific rabbinic sages. That collective body of knowledge, discussed and debated for hundreds of years, is what ultimately was preserved as our written Talmud. With their innovation, the great collective conversation that became the Talmud began.

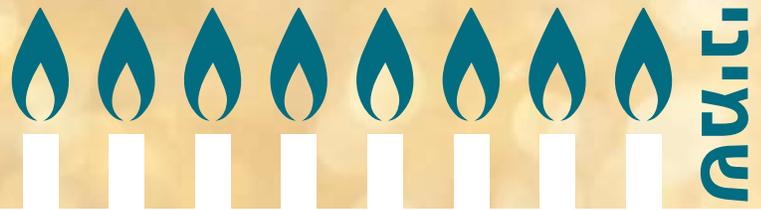
On this seventh night of Hanukkah, New Year's Eve, we can celebrate the revolutionary work of Abaye and Rava, whose genius made possible the Talmud, one of history's great intellectual achievements. Each light represents a marvel of this great work: dynamic, multilayered conversation, dialogue and debate, the synthesis of oral tradition with biblical texts, and a framework for ethical, legal, and spiritual reasoning that transcends time and place.



- ▶ **Share something that you created or helped bring to fruition over the past year that fills you with a sense of accomplishment.**
- ▶ **What is one intention you can set to make 2025 a meaningful and impactful year? How does this intention align with the Jewish values you want to embody?**



# 8. TOWARDS JEWISH UNITY



One of the most vital messages of the Hanukkah story is the enduring need for unity among the Jewish people. This theme, deeply embedded in Jewish history, resonates powerfully today as Israel faces an ongoing war and Jewish communities worldwide confront rising antisemitism. Reflecting on a verse from Judges, Rabbi Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437–1508, Portugal) offers profound insight into how internal unity is not just desirable but essential for overcoming external threats:

### שופטים כ"א:ה

ויאמרו בני ישראל מי אשר לא־עלה בקהל מכל־שבטי ישראל אל־ה' כי השבועה הגדולה היתה לאשר לא־עלה אל־ה' המצפה לאמר מות יומת.

### Judges 21:5

The Israelites asked, "Is there anyone from all the tribes of Israel who failed to come up to the assembly before God?" For a solemn oath had been taken concerning anyone who did not go up to God at Mizpah: He shall be put to death.

### אברבנאל על שופטים כ"א:ה

ועשו זה בדרך גדר וסיג, כ"א יקרה עוד כדבר הזה שישלחו ישראל לקרוא לכל איש המלחמה שיתקבצו במקום אחד שלא יעצור כח עיר אחת להפרד מן הצבור ולהפר השבועה, כי אם יהיה כן יעשו כלם כזה פעמים רבות אחרות ואולי בעת צרה ומלחמה כשלא יבואו יהיה זה סבה לשיכשל ישראל לפני אויביהם. לכן ראו ליסר ביסורים קשים העיר אשר לא תבוא לקהל ונפרדה מאחיה בני ישראל, באופן שכל ישראל ישמעו ויראו ולא יהיו נפרדים מן הצבור פעם אחרת. ולכן לא התירו השבועה אף שיוכלו להתירו מן הדין, לפי שכל טוב ישראל והשארותם נתלה בהתאחדם יחד.

### Abarbanel on Judges 21:5

They [the Israelites] took this action as a preventative measure to ensure that, in future times, when Israel called upon its warriors to gather in one place, no city would feel it could separate from the community and violate an oath. Were this to occur repeatedly, especially in times of crisis or war, it could lead to Israel's downfall before their enemies. Thus, they determined to impose punishment on any city that failed to join the assembly, ensuring that all Israel would heed and never separate from the community again. For this reason, they did not annul the oath, even though they could have done so legally, because Israel's well-being and survival depended on their unity.

Judges 21:5 recounts how the Israelites swore that anyone who failed to join the national assembly to determine action against the Benjaminites would be put to death. This verse highlights the gravity of communal unity and collective participation, especially during a time of national crisis. Abarbanel explains that enforcing the oath served as a preventative measure, setting a powerful precedent: no one could separate themselves from the shared responsibility of the nation. In his view, this cohesion was not merely practical but existential—essential for the survival and strength of the Jewish people.

In the aftermath of October 7 and amidst the ongoing war in Israel, this ancient call for Jewish unity remains profoundly relevant. Like the Israelites who recognized the existential danger of fragmentation, our current moment demands solidarity. As we light the eighth and final candle of Hanukkah tonight, its full brilliance reminds us that unity is more than collaboration—it is the very foundation of Jewish survival. To burn our brightest as a people requires intention and effort, including setting aside our differences for the collective good. Only together can we illuminate the darkest of times and secure our shared future.

► How can you, within your family or local community, contribute to fostering unity and collective responsibility in a way that strengthens the resilience of the Jewish people during this critical time?