

# A Counting Hallel for Hanukkah

by Debbie Perlman

**P**raise the  
One Who makes  
miracles!

**One light in darkness  
To vanquish years of strife;  
One light is all we need  
To illuminate a new beginning.**

One is enough, Almighty God  
To pierce the darkness.

Two shining in synchrony,  
Two lights to recall sun and moon;  
God's light in the universe  
Becomes our light to use for good.

Two are enough, Almighty God  
To reveal You ever near to us.

Three lights pure and clear,  
A triad sounding in the darkness,  
A major chord louder than sadness  
Resonates with ancient voices.

Three are enough, Almighty God  
Three nights to sing Your praise.

Four lights define the holy ark,  
Cleaned of desecration, polished,  
Refreshed in holiness,  
Gleaming through the toil of our hands.

Four are enough, Almighty God,  
Four corners of Your earth restored.

Five lights trace with fingertip care  
The faces of all gathered to work  
In the daily sanctification of Your Name,  
Simple kindnesses that make us holy.

Five are enough, Almighty God,  
To feel Your hand on our shoulders.

Six lights that connect us together,  
Generations and cousins, friends and strangers,  
Searching together to repair and rebuild,  
To banish hunger and cold and doubt.

Six are enough, Almighty God,  
To bind our hearts to one another.

Seven lights shimmer like liquid gold  
To bless the ordinary and make it holy.

In partnership with You, we choose.  
In partnership, we glow with new light.

Seven are enough, Almighty God,  
For us to distinguish the path to righteousness.

Eight lights flame, a week and a day,  
More than the hand or heart can hold,  
But still we grasp it all,  
Greedy to draw near to You.

Eight are enough, Almighty God,  
To point us toward our future:

**To light the path to miracles.**

## LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS: REVISITING THE SCHOOL OF SHAMMAI



*Our Rabbis taught: It is an imperative [mitzvah] of Hanukkah that there be one candle for a person and his/her household. And the strictly observant light a candle for each and every member of the household. And for the strictest of the strict? The School of Shammai says: the first day we light eight candles, and every day thereafter decrease the number. And the School of Hillel says: the first day we light one candle, and every day thereafter increase the number....*

**Babylonian Talmud  
Tractate Shabbat 21b**



**W**e sometimes think that the way we observe traditional rituals is the only way that such rituals have ever been observed. The above passage from the Talmud teaches us that our current practice of lighting Hanukkah candles actually began as one version of a particular practice of “the strictest of the strict.” Following the teaching of the School of Hillel, we add one candle each night, which takes 44 candles per Hanukkah *menorah* (lamp) for the entire holiday. However, we can see from this passage that one candle per household per night—not including the *shammash* (helper candle)—was originally considered sufficient.

We tend to take our abundance for granted, until we are confronted with the prospect of scarcity. During hurricanes and other emergencies which leave communities without electrical

power, those who light candles against the darkness can best appreciate the many centuries in which candles were the sole source of night light. Moreover, Hanukkah candles are intended only for “publicizing the miracle” and not for any of the practical purposes that we usually associate with lighting. From this perspective, we can all appreciate what an expense these candles must have presented in the past—especially for poor Jews anxious to fulfill the requirements of the *mitzvah*.

So when we are left with a single candle, we should not be so quick to devalue its worth. Perhaps the time has come to revisit the School of Shammai and its teaching on this matter. According to our text above, the teaching of the School of Hillel was not the only accepted approach of those who chose (and could afford) to light more than one candle per night. The School of Shammai advocated that we begin by lighting eight candles on the first night, and decrease to one candle by the eighth night.

Further down the page of the same Talmudic discussion, we find the basic question “What is Hanukkah?” followed by the familiar story of the miraculous flask of oil that burned for eight days. It can be argued that the practice of the School of Shammai—beginning with eight candles and decreasing to one—more accurately evokes the experience of this miracle, which was measured not by the quantity of oil but by the ongoing presence of light against all odds.

We learn from early sources that the rivalry between the schools of Shammai and Hillel was considered a *makh’loket l’shem shamayim*—a “controversy for the sake of heaven.” Although we have been trained to

follow the School of Hillel in most matters, this particular teaching of the School of Shammai offers a special healing message to those facing illness and loss: the quality of our lives can be more important than the quantity of our possessions, our activities, or even our days. Even the single candle can bring light, purpose and fulfillment.

This is a crucial healing insight, and one that shines forth from among the contemporary personal blessings written by those struggling with illness: \*

*“My God, let me focus not on what my body cannot do, but on what my body can do. Let me give thanks for what still works. Let me hope for what does not work. For no matter what, no matter how my body lapses, my soul, with each breath I take, is like the flicker of a candle within my being.”*

*“The weaker my body becomes, the stronger the fire of my soul burns. Thank You for freeing me from the distractions which prevented me from self-examination and spiritual growth.”*

In our high-tech world, which grows more complex with the introduction of each new electronic device, we human beings continue to derive great comfort and inspiration from the simple light of candles. It is no coincidence that festivals of light converge across cultures at this darkest, coldest season of the year. We all need the reassurance of light and warmth to help us face the days ahead.

May this season of Hanukkah illuminate all of our lives with the blessings of hope, love and courage.

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\* From our NCJH publication *When the Body Hurts, the Soul Still Longs to Sing*.

# Great Miracles:

## Eight Healing Lessons from/for Hanukkah

**H**anukkah, the mid-winter Festival of Lights, celebrates the re-dedication of the Temple after its ritual defilement by the Greco-Syrians, and the successful resistance of the people to tyranny and assimilation. The themes of the holiday of Hanukkah - images of Judah and the Maccabees, a military triumph, a restored Temple, national autonomy – may seem initially to be unrelated to healing. And sometimes, when we are suffering, holidays only seem to thicken the gloom that shrouds our spirits. Yet patients, family members, chaplains, doctors, rabbis, and *bikkur holim* volunteers have been teaching us to draw profound healing richness from this post-biblical holiday.

Here, as a Hanukkah gift for you, are eight healing lessons we have selected—eight small flames to illuminate our lives with hope and meaning.

**1.** The Hanukkah story is understood as a struggle for independence and a reassertion of religious-spiritual identity. Jews challenged by illness may or may not be blessed by physical cure; but they can—with the help of God, tradition, and community—re-establish their inner strength and achieve emergence, clarity, and resolution.

**2.** We need a candle to light the candles—the *shammash* is a critical partner in our efforts to illumine the holiday. Reflected in this requirement is the reality that we need each other to bring healing. As the *shammash* is generally identical to the other lights; ultimately, we are all candidates for both roles, healer and healed. Jewish healing is multi-directional.

**3.** Just as the small cruse of oil seemed far too little yet proved to be more than enough, perhaps it is possible to find that even in our own darkness, there is light enough. Perhaps we can find ways to learn from the darkness itself: to discover new kinds of vision, to see with the inner eye.

**4.** Eight is a Jewish number of re-dedication. In the Bible, firstborn animals are consecrated to God on the eighth day after their birth and Hebrew boys are circumcised on the eighth day. And it requires a seven-day period of purification to re-dedicate a sanctuary. Eight, then, represents a new beginning, a renewed commitment—a helpful number for spiritual healing.

**5.** All Jews are obligated to light the *Hanukkiyah*—including women and children. The reason given for this universal requirement is that everyone took part in the miracle, the entire people—all together. Jewish healing similarly depends on the participation of everyone. It takes “the village,” the whole community, to reach for wholeness, comfort, support, and strength.

**6.** We light the *Hanukkiyah* in the window in order to publicize the miracle. The miracles of life—which are as everyday as a step, a word, a breath—must be acknowledged, advertised, shared, and celebrated.

**7.** The Hebrew letters on the dreidel—*nun, gimel, hey, shin*—are reminders of the miraculous event of long ago. But they also point to the ultimate redemption, as their *gematria* (numerical value) equals that of the four letter of *mashiah*, Messiah—*mem, shin, yud, het*. Ultimately, we will reach the supreme Hanukkah—an era of peace, justice, harmony, and tranquility.

**8.** The *Haftarah* (Prophetic Reading) selected centuries ago for the Shabbat of Hanukkah, offers a powerful and somewhat surprising statement: “Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). This assertion counters the Hanukkah story’s potential to over-invest us in military prowess; also suggesting the ultimate triumph of the Spirit over suffering, and the possibility of spiritual healing even when physical cure is remote or impossible.

—RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW  
Rabbinic Director, NCJH

# BLESSING AND EXTENDING THE LIGHT: A Ritual of Healing for the Eight Nights of Hanukkah

*Hanukkah* comes at the darkest moments of the year—close to the winter solstice with its shortest day and longest night; at the point in the month when the moon is obscured. Our response is to light candles in an effort to draw light into the world and to appreciate even the humblest, tiniest flickers of light as a blessing. For those who are struggling with illness or other serious life challenges, sitting with this darkness and meditating upon the light can provide comfort, inspiration, and perspective.

Even if we ourselves and those near and dear to us are fortunate not to be suffering, Jewish tradition urges us to be mindful of all of those who are ill by praying with and for them. Our daily prayers include hope for physical cure and spiritual healing for our loved ones, as well as for those we do not know. Jewish healing is thus an ongoing communal enterprise, potent in its concern for anyone dealing with illness, rich in its influence on the pray-er, and valuable in its ability to encourage “horizontal”, inter-personal support even if divine, “vertical” intervention seem alien or remote.

Our thoughts and prayers, of course, may be all the more effective when they are tied to the particular needs and hopes of those who are suffering. But how can this be

practical, when the kinds of afflictions are numerous; the personalities, challenges, and resources of those who are ill so diverse; and the courses and prognoses of disease so shifting and unpredictable?

One way is to seek to step into the experience of people who are ill, to empathically explore the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual passages they travel. While no two people have precisely the same experiences, we offer eight commonly-shared junctures in the journey of illness. For each, we have selected verses from the Book of Psalms centered around images of light—for reflection, study, prayer, chanting, and/or meditation.

We suggest that each night of Hanukkah, just before lighting the candles, we all pray for those who are ill, focusing on a particular juncture in the journey. Trying to imagine what the experience might be like, recite or chant the verse from Psalms (or, if you are able/inclined, utilize the entire Psalm). And then offer your own prayer for those living with illness and in need of spiritual strength.

The greatest “Hanukkah gift” is light. May our prayers, *tz’dakah*, and deeds of loving-kindness spark hope and strength, and illumine lives with renewed meaning and direction.



אָז יִבְקַע כִּשְׁחַר אֹרֶךְ  
וְאֶרְכָּתֶךָ מִהֵרָה תִצְמַח

*“Then shall Your light burst through like dawn,  
and Your healing spring up quickly.”* (ISAIAH 58:8)

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW  
Rabbinic Director, NCJH

*Before lighting the candles, begin each night with the following:*

“Adonai/my God, Source of healing and hope, we dedicate this night of Hanukkah to those who (complete with appropriate line below.) Give them and those who care for them rich blessings of strength and support, solace and determination. Illumine their lives with insight and guidance, and shine peace and serenity on their path.”

*Recite or chant the appropriate verse from Psalms, and then continue with the traditional ritual of lighting the candles.*

### *The first night of Hanukkah: ... are experiencing pain or symptoms*

יהוה אורי וישעי ממי אירא Adonai is my Light and my Salvation – whom will I fear?  
יהוה מעוז חיי ממי אפחד: Adonai is the Strength of my life – who can make me afraid?  
(Psalms 27:1)

### *The second night of Hanukkah: ... are moving through tests and evaluations*

כיאתה תאיר גרי It is You who lights my candle,  
יהוה אלהי יגיה חשפי: Adonai, my God, illumines the darkness.  
(Psalms 18:29)

### *The third night of Hanukkah: ... are receiving a diagnosis*

גול על-יהוה דרכה Leave your way to Adonai,  
ויבטח עליו והוא יעשה: Trust in Adonai, who will do it.  
והוציא כאור צדקה Adonai will cause your vindication to shine forth like the light,  
ומשפטו כצהריים: the justice of your case like noonday sun.  
(Psalms 37: 5-6)

### *The fourth night of Hanukkah: ... are receiving treatments*

שלח-אורה ואמתה Send forth Your light and Your truth –  
המה ינחוני They will lead me;  
יביאוני אליהר-קדשה They will bring me to Your holy mountain,  
ואל-משכנותיה: to Your dwelling-place.  
(Psalms 43:3)

### *The fifth night of Hanukkah: ... are undergoing surgery*

כי עמך מקור חיים With You is the source of life;  
באורה נראה-אור: in Your light do we see light.  
(Psalms 36:10)

### *The sixth night of Hanukkah: ... are recovering from surgery and/or treatments*

כי הצלת נפשי ממוות For You have saved me from death,  
הלא רגלי מדחי O yes, my foot from stumbling,  
להתהלך לפני אלהים that I may walk in the presence of God,  
באור החיים: in the light of life.  
(Psalms 56:14)

### *The seventh night of Hanukkah: ... are “re-entering” – stepping into the next phase of life*

נר לרגלי דברך A lamp unto my feet is Your word,  
ואור לנתיבותי: A light for my path.  
(Psalms 119:105)

### *The eighth night of Hanukkah: ...are surviving – incorporating the illness into their lives and stories*

אור נרע לצדיק Light is sown for the righteous,  
והישרי-לב שמחה: Radiant joy for the upright-at-heart.  
שמחו צדיקים ביהוה O you righteous ones, rejoice in Adonai,  
והודו לזכר קדשו: and offer thanks to Adonai’s holy name!  
(Psalms 97:11-12)

## A HANUKKAH TALE

by Debbie Perlman

**H**anukkah is a time of miracles. It commemorates how a small band of the faithful, the Maccabees, succeeded against enormous odds to reclaim the Temple in Jerusalem from the Syrian-Greeks.

In our own lives, we often face challenges that feel as enormous as the ones the Maccabees confronted. It may be illness, the loss of a loved one, changed family circumstances, the effort to find new employment. We feel small, pitted against a world that seems huge and cruel. We must fight, as the Maccabees did, to regain our faith and a sense of wholeness and peace in our lives. We must find the strength to re-dedicate ourselves to lives filled with holiness and firm knowledge of God's affection.

Hanukkah begins each year when we light the first candle and place our Hanukkah menorah in the window to broadcast the miracle.

### Hanukkah

#### *Psalm 66*

*For E.G.P., with All Manner of Drums*

**How quickly are the candles consumed,  
Brief, miraculous lights;  
Lights only for glory and redemption,  
Lights only for Your praise and honor.**

**In warm arms I held your tiny body,  
And lit candles for eight nights;  
So long ago, so swift a time ago,  
Years' memories are blurred.**

**Here, even before you could know,  
Here in my arms, the candles' glow  
Told you the story of the miracle,  
The song of the Holy One.**

Just a month old, my daughter sleeps in my arms as I hold the *shammash* and light the first candle of Hanukkah, 1977. My husband, snapping the picture, smiles. It is December 5th. Four months later, our world will be turned inside out. On April 7, 1978, I learn I have cancer — advanced Hodgkins' lymphoma. Cancer was not my address — not the home of a twenty-seven-year-old new mother. We became Maccabees.

But the prognosis was favorable. Diagnosis, chemotherapy, radiation — the doctors assured me of a "cure." The "cure" lasted from just before Pesach to Hanukkah. Less than a year.

Before Pesach, 1979, a year to the day of my initial diagnosis, I had a recurrence. There had been no Hanukkah miracle. I spent the next year in and out of the hospital with treatments and side effects and after-effects. We were Maccabees again.

During Hanukkah, 1980, I wrote a *Chicago Sun-Times* op-ed story about my "special Hanukkah gifts" — the modern technologies that had kept me alive (no small accomplishment in those days); the gifts of an understanding and supportive husband; a delightful growing baby; sweet and helpful family and friends; a devoted synagogue community. And for the other gifts I found inside myself — God-given, I was sure — that allowed me to learn to graciously accept all these offerings and grow stronger in the experience of adversity. I wrote about the miracle that had "kept me in life, sustained me, and allowed to reach this season of joy."

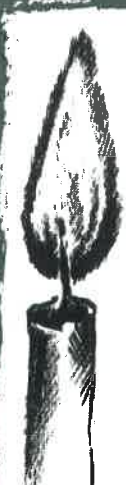
*And through the years, as leaning against me,  
Your hand in mine, we moved the shammash  
To kindle for eight brief nights  
The shining, miraculous lights.*

But I had spoken too quickly. Now I found myself in the lost years, years of pain and terror. A second recurrence of cancer. Then a third. Then cure, but disability. I learn from the now-grown daughter that they were also my "crabby" years, so involved was I with just existing day to day within the narrowed space of illness and self-inventory.

Then something changed. I began to write, first to help a friend, and then to help myself. I found my prayer voice, the



WANDER



“Hold out the  
single cruse,  
Holy One,  
As we turn  
our hearts  
to flame  
in wonder,

Multiply our  
ingenuity  
to see miracles  
in this  
constancy  
of your care”

words that God would help me find to consolidate my illness,  
to reorganize my life, to fill my need to give back.

*Now, side by side, we double the lights.  
Too brief, too quickly are the candles consumed.  
Such short spans are our years,  
Too brief a time to honor and praise.*

*In warm arms I hold you tall against me,  
Laughing in the wonder of the miracle  
Of who you are,  
Praising the Eternal.*

The infant is grown and so am I. Through the years,  
we have discovered again and again the miracle of the light  
we can allow into our lives despite adversity and  
illness and change.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:**

*Nes gadol haya sham* — “A great miracle happened there.” This is the traditional phrase that summarizes [recounts] the Hanukkah story. “*Nissim gedolim hayu po*” — “Great miracles happen here.” This variation of the phrase reflects my belief in the miracles that can happen around us in our daily lives. Light, in any form, never fails to spread hope and joy.

© Debbie Perlman.

\* The two psalms are from *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing & Praise*, Rad Publishers, 1998.

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## Hanukkah

### *Psalm 141*

*Nes gadol haya sham.*  
Holy One, Your miracle of light  
Vanquished the darkness of defilement,  
Embracing us in holiness.

*Nissim gedolim hayu po.*  
Holy One, Your daily miracles  
Wait for us, sorting through darkness  
To kindle new lights of holiness.

Not eight day lasting oil  
But everlasting loyalty and devotion,  
Standing as Maccabees against modern blows,  
Night terrors of a changing world.

Hold out the single cruse, Holy One,  
As we turn our hearts to flame in wonder;  
Multiply our ingenuity to see miracles  
In this constancy of Your care.

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