Lehrhaus is a forum to generate thoughtful and dynamic discourse exploring the depth and diversity of Jewish ideas.

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Dear Friends,

From our launch in 2016, Hanukkah has always held a special place in our hearts at The Lehrhaus. The Menorah’s symbolism of the various branches of wisdom surrounding, illuminating, and illuminated by the central candelabrum of Torah, not to mention the Menorah’s significance as both an ancient and modern-day Jewish symbol, perfectly embody the integrated and traditional-yet-contemporary Torah perspectives we proudly promote on The Lehrhaus platform.

Yet this year, the holiday of Hanukkah has taken on a further layer of significance. Multiple Lehrhaus pieces have noted that Hanukkah is positioned near the winter solstice as a reminder that light can and must illuminate even seemingly impenetrable darkness. As the COVID-19 pandemic surpasses nine months in America and numerous countries across the globe where our contributors and readers live, we find ourselves in the midst of the darkest winter in recent memory. The staggering toll of the novel coronavirus - physical, psychological, and spiritual - has left no one unscathed. The racial riots and fractious political environment in America, including rising internal political tensions within Modern Orthodoxy, have left many of us feeling further beleaguered and fatigued.

Yet throughout this period, The Lehrhaus has remained a beacon of light for the community. The challenging environment notwithstanding, we have spread more Torah over the last nine months than in any nine-month period since our founding, with readership and total articles published up significantly, and more readers and contributors utilizing our platform than ever before.

Memories of deceased rabbinic personalities have garnered tens of thousands of views. Reflections on corona, which range from the “Corona Haggadah” to analytical prose essays to personal poetry, as well as reflections on burning contemporary issues, have enabled us to reach new readers. Above all, the quality of our content has remained extremely high, even as our output continues to grow.

The essays featured in this reader, both old and new, are a testament to our commitment to continue featuring outstanding Torah content, no matter the circumstances. Above all, they are a tribute to our engaged authors and readers - in short, the Lehrhaus community - who continue to prize the content we are fortunate enough to host.

May it be His will that we emerge soon from this dark period, strengthened, steeled, and inspired to confront whatever opportunities and challenges lie at this winter’s end.

With warm wishes for a joyous Hanukkah,

The Lehrhaus Editors
The two great schools of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel found themselves once again at odds. Beit Shammai ruled that on each night of Hanukkah we should light the candles in descending order, while Beit Hillel ruled that they should be ascending. What is the motivation behind each opinion?

The Gemara in Shabbat 21b offers cryptic reasons behind Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel’s opinions. Hazal suggest that Beit Shammai compare the Hanukkah candles to the “parei he-hag,” the bulls brought as sacrifices on the holiday of Sukkot, which decreased in number each day; in contrast, Beit Hillel’s ruling is based on the principle of “ma’alin ba-kodesh ve’ein moridin,” that one should increase in holiness and not decrease.

However, there is a significant problem with these explanations. Beit Hillel’s reason that you should only increase in holiness seems so compelling that it is difficult to understand how Beit Shammai could reject it. Perhaps we could understand Beit Shammai’s reason for rejecting ma’alin ba-kodesh if they quoted a similarly important principle in defense of their ruling. However, Beit Shammai do not cite a principle; they merely compare the Hanukkah candles to one aspect of the parei he-hag. This is not an argument but an analogy, and it does not seem to be an adequate response to Beit Hillel’s argument.

The explanations of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai are not comparable and seem to be operating on very different planes. Therefore, our first job in untangling these reasons is to understand how Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel are in fact operating on precisely the same plane.

What is Beit Shammai based on?

Beit Shammai maintains that we should compare the lighting of the Hanukkiah with the order of sacrifices listed in Parshat Pinhas for Sukkot. There we offer thirteen bulls the first day, twelve the next, and so on, all the way down to seven on the last day of the holiday. So too on Hanukkah, maintains Beit Shammai, we should start with eight and work down to one. However, the connection between Sukkot and Hanukkah remains unclear.

What actually happened on Hanukkah? The Beit ha-Mikdash had been desecrated by the Greeks; re-consecrating it was the first priority of the Hashmonaim when they won the war. They immediately returned to the Beit ha-Mikdash with the intention of bringing it back to its previous glory, re-purifying it, and re-dedicating it in service of God.
Hanukkah is about *hanukkat ha-bayit*, a dedication of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. Beit Shammai invites us to look at the other times in our history when the Jewish people dedicated a *Beit ha-Mikdash*. For example, they always do so on Sukkot. In *Melakhim* I 8:1-4, we read about Shlomo ha-Melekh gathering *Benei Yisrael* (the Israelites) to Jerusalem to inaugurate the first *Beit ha-Mikdash* specifically on Sukkot. In *Ezra* 3:1-4, we see Ezra doing the same for the second Temple.

Beit Shammai is suggesting that on Hanukkah, the time when the Jews regained their *Beit ha-Mikdash* and re-sanctified it, we should be reminded strongly of Sukkot because when the Jews build a new *Beit ha-Mikdash*, they inaugurate it on Sukkot. In fact, *Maccabees* II 10:5-7 records that when the *Hashmonaim* retook the *Beit ha-Mikdash* on Hanukkah, they celebrated for eight days, explicitly stating that it was “in the manner of Sukkot.” Although they did not win the war at the time of Sukkot, they still chose to re-dedicate the Temple with a Sukkot-style holiday, which included bringing the *parei he-hag*.

We now know that throughout Tanakh, Sukkot is linked to the event of *hanukkat ha-bayit*. However, we still do not understand what specific element of Sukkot is being drawn on here. The answer to this will help us understand Beit Shammai’s reasoning, but let us leave it for a moment to gain a deeper perspective on the basis for Beit Hillel’s reasoning.

**What is Beit Hillel based on?**

Rashi on *Shabbat* 21b (s.v. *ma’alin ba-kodesh*) points to a *gemara* in *Menahot* 99a, which is the original source for the principle of *ma’alin ba-kodesh*. Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi teaches us that we learn this principle from the way that Moshe Rabbeinu built the *Mishkan* (the Tabernacle). Moshe built the *Mishkan* from its smallest parts at the bottom to the top. Is this not obvious? How else does one build, if not from the bottom up?

However, the way the verses describe the *Beit ha-Mikdash* subtly departs from the principle of *ma’alin ba-kodesh*. Granted, Shlomo followed the basic principle of building “from the floor of the house till the ceiling beams” (*Melakhim* I 6:15-16). However, in decorating the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, he inverted the pattern; the text first describes the intricate copper work on the tops of the pillars and then descends to describe the “molten sea,” working from brim to base (*Melakhim* I 7). The book of Melakhim apparently thought that it is more important to mention the top before the bottom. Is this to suggest that one should sometimes go down in holiness?

Another way of expressing the idea of bottom-to-top and vice versa is to frame it as building from within or building from without. The *Mishkan* was built purely out of materials found in the desert (*Shemot* 35:20-29). *Benei Yisrael* freely donated all the necessary materials, implying that they were all in the as when Moshe first built the *Mishkan* he did so in a way that exemplified *ma’alin ba-kodesh*, so too on Hanukkah, we should recall the *Mishkan* by starting at the bottom and reaching up to Hashem. We emphasize this idea in the Torah reading throughout Hanukkah, which is taken from *Parshat Naso* (when Moshe and *Benei Yisrael* first dedicated the *Mishkan*).

It is thus clear that far from addressing one another’s opinions at cross purposes, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai are in fact very much in conversation with one another. They agree that the dedication of a previous holy house serves as the prototype for Hanukkah. They only differ on which house. Beit Shammai think it should commemorate the *Beit ha-Mikdash* while Beit Hillel think it should commemorate the *Mishkan*.

But what makes the building of the Mishkan or the *Beit ha-Mikdash* a more appropriate model for Hanukkah?

**Building the Mishkan and the Beit ha-Mikdash**

What is the difference between these two construction projects? We have already noted that the *Mishkan* was built on the principle of *ma’alin ba-kodesh*, as Moshe built the *Mishkan* from its smallest parts at the bottom to the top. Is this not obvious? How else does one build, if not from the bottom up?

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desert with them. They started with what was available to them within their own community and built up to Hashem. Shlomo, on the other hand, sourced his materials from far and wide, not only from within Eretz Yisrael but from other nations too (Melakhim I 5:27-32). He created his great house for Hashem with wood, stone, and precious metals from the entire world. He was working outside-in.2

These building techniques reflect the characters of each great house. Moshe built the Mishkan from the bottom up, demonstrating to Benei Yisrael that between us and God, we must start at the bottom of a long ladder where the only right direction is up. An important quality of the Mishkan was the way it encouraged intimacy between Hashem and Benei Yisrael, being alone in the desert. In this private relationship with Hashem, the only focus was on how to become closer to Hashem; to draw closer, one must take gradual steps up one’s personal ladder toward Hashem. The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 35) tells us that Hashem showed Moshe exactly what the Mishkan looked like, with the result that the Mishkan was built precisely to the specifications of Hashem. Bnei Yisrael wanted to unify themselves entirely with Hashem’s wishes in building the Mishkan, an expression of intimacy between them.

Shlomo, however, was building God’s house as a grand statement to all of humanity. He knew that when introducing people to Hashem for the first time, he needed to dazzle them with magnificent ceilings and masterpieces of design. His Beit ha-Mikdash was built to showcase Hashem’s glory to other people, rather than being purely about Benei Yisrael’s relationship with Hashem. Shlomo stated this goal explicitly in his prayer at the dedication of the Beit ha-Mikdash: “Also the non-Jew, who is not of Your people Israel, but will come from a far country for the sake of Your Name. For they shall hear of Your great Name, and of Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm, and he will come and pray toward this house” (Melakhim I 7:41-42). In fact, this mission was accomplished in his lifetime. The Queen of Sheba came precisely because she heard of the name of Hashem which Shlomo had made famous (Melakhim I 10:1). Zekhariah (14:16) tells us that in the future, the nations of the world will come and celebrate Sukkot along with Benei Yisrael.

It is Sukkot which is the festival most representative of this purpose of the Beit ha-Mikdash; therefore, it is Sukkot which was chosen by Shlomo, Ezra, the Hashmonaim, and Beit Shammai to commemorate the inauguration and re-inauguration of the Beit ha-Mikdash. On Sukkot, we bring a different number of bulls each day (the parei he-hag), which adds up to seventy. Hazal teach (Sukkah 55b) that these bulls represent the seventy nations of the world. The Midrash (Tanhuma Pinhas 16) expands on this, suggesting that here Benei Yisrael bring the parei he-hag with the intention of inspiring the nations of the world to come to Jerusalem to love Hashem and the Jewish people. They don’t just represent the nations; they actively try to bring them closer.

For seven days of Sukkot, Benei Yisrael pour their national energy into inspiring others. They start with thirteen bulls, the largest number of the most expensive and impressive sacrifice that we are obligated to bring throughout the Jewish calendar. Why? When someone new walked into the Beit ha-Mikdash on Sukkot, she was mesmerized by magnificent ceilings and intricate copper work, blown away by the bountiful bull sacrifices offered in honor of the Creator. The first time is as impressive and exciting as possible. The following days are gradually less so as we try to transition them to a more normal and constant mode of worshipping Hashem.

Back to Hanukkah

We have explained how the ideas of parei he-hag and ma’alin ba-kodesh are closely related to the inauguration of the Mishkan and the Beit ha-Mikdash and are therefore suitable precedents to choose for Hanukkah, and we have explained Beit Shammai’s underlying logic. But now the tables are turned. Beit Shammai’s rationale seems to be more intuitive than Beit Hillel’s. Since the Hanukkah story is about the Beit ha-Mikdash, why go back to the Mishkan?

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The Mishkan represents the intimate relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people, while the Beit ha-Mikdash (particularly the element of parei he-hag) represents the way that the Jewish people take their existing relationship with Hashem and spread that message to the world.

I would like to suggest that Beit Hillel understand that Hanukkah is all about the relationship between Benei Yisrael and Hashem. The Greeks were fighting a fundamentally spiritual battle against the Jewish people, seeking to undermine the essential elements of our relationship with Hashem. We say in Al ha-Nissim that “the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to make them transgress the statutes (hukim) of your will.” The Greeks were attacking the Torah, which was given particularly to the Jewish people, directing their efforts against the statutes (hukim), the laws without logical explanation, which are based entirely on our trust and faith in Hashem. And while Hashem helped Benei Yisrael win the war, He also gave them another miracle, separate from the national public victory. This was the miracle of the Menorah, which occurred in the intimacy of the Heikhal, a place that only the priests were allowed to go, showing Benei Yisrael that their relationship with Hashem had been redeemed. Of course the most appropriate symbol to choose for honoring our intimate relationship with Hashem is that of the Mishkan, not the Beit ha-Mikdash. And that, I suggest, is why Beit Shammai’s reason relied on the principle of ma’alin ba-kodesh.

Beit Shammai read the story differently. In their view, Hashem helped Benei Yisrael achieve their victory because the Beit ha-Mikdash had been desecrated and was no longer capable of spreading the name of Hashem to all the nations. Indeed, how could it so long as there were idols in the Heikhal? Hashem helped the Jews win the war and take back the Beit ha-Mikdash in order for them to once again fulfill their mission of spreading His name. As we say in Al ha-Nissim, “You made for Yourself a great and holy name in the world, and for Your people Israel, You performed a great salvation.” The miracle of the oil in the center of the Beit ha-Mikdash is a strong assertion of Hashem’s renewed presence there. He intends to reside in His house and, from there, spread His light far and wide. The ideal of the Beit ha-Mikdash, expressed by the parei he-hag, is the ultimate parsomei nissa (publicizing of the miracle). That, I suggest, is why Beit Shammai chooses to link the Hanukkah candles to the parei he-hag. Yet we rule in accordance with Beit Hillel that the essential element of the Hanukkah candles is the Jewish people’s personal relationship with Hashem. When we walk into the Beit ha-Mikdash, we aspire to have a different experience from that of many others. We will see not the beautiful trappings but the basic structure, the work that went into building it. We know the effort it takes to grow close to Hashem, and we pray that the rest of the world will also come close to Hashem, working up from the nuts and bolts of the relationship to reach its magnificent heights.

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3. The idea that these words refer to a particular relationship that Benei Yisrael have with Hashem is based on a Hanukkah sihah of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 5726 and 5734 (Likkutei Sihot [heb.] 25, Hanukkah), which I learned with my father, Tim Cowen. Thank you for all you have taught me and continue to teach me.

4. Beit Shammai’s position is reflected in our choice of haftarah on Shabbat Hanukkah. On the first Shabbat we read Zekhariah 2:14-4:7, a vision of the rebuilding of the second Beit ha-Mikdash. On the second Shabbat we read Melachhim I 7:40-50, the completion of the work on the first Beit ha-Mikdash by Shlomo ha-Melekh.

5. This mahloket between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel could be said to parallel their debate about the way that Hashem built the world. In Bereishit Rabba 1:15 we read, “Beit Shammai said the heavens were created first and after that the earth was created. Beit Hillel said the earth was created first and afterward the heavens.” Here too, we see them arguing about the order or building - do we build up or down? Perhaps Beit Shammai are consistently of the opinion that our job in this world is to take inspiration from above and spread it outward, while Beit Hillel think that Hashem made the world with the primary desire that we humans learn to rise closer to Him. My thanks to my father for pointing out this parallel.
It was a hit because it’s catchy, it’s dancy, and the guys can really sing. And, let’s be honest, the Hanukkah pop song pantry is pretty bare. There’s some esoteric Matisyahu, some historically confusing Woody Guthrie, and a bunch of Adam Sandler nonsense. After that, my nana’s endless stash of sugar free kichlach starts looking relatively appetizing by comparison.

So that’s the simple explanation, the peshat: The Maccabeats’ “Candlelight” works because it sounds pretty good and the competition is limited in both scope and quality.

But what, beyond its obvious sonic merit and colorful video, made the Maccabeats’ adaptation of Taio Cruz’s “Dynamite” a sensation capable of garnering tens of millions of YouTube hits? Such analytical journeys often benefit from a kickstart of personal experience, and for that my own will have to suffice. On whatever day in 2010 I first heard “Candlelight,” my initial reaction was one of joy, but also something else. The song was both fun and funny. Now, sure, it’s a playful concept and there’s something clever in its execution. But, for me at least, that wasn’t it. In fact, I remember being struck primarily by the song’s lyrical sincerity--think about the song’s bridge, an almost embarrassing paean to the Great Menorah. My amusement, I think, resulted instead from a clash of expectations. In my worldview, admittedly disproven by the case at hand, the cultural spheres of Orthodox Judaism and danceclub sugarpop existed on different planes, never to be mixed. Seeing them in such an unapologetic embrace resulted, for me, in a sense of comic incongruity. Like a roller skating dog, “Candlelight” provoked a satisfying and comedic feeling of “that can’t be and yet it is.”

Of course, “Candlelight” is more than just funny and perhaps to those more familiar with the culture of Yeshiva University, it wasn’t all that incongruous in the first place. Nonetheless, my reaction identifies a central quality of the song’s construction: it is, above all, hybrid. This descriptor is used in a variety of fashions these days, with different industrial metaphors having significant ramifications on how we come to understand the nature of cultural products such as “Candlelight.” Is the song a hybrid like a car might be, having two separate traits that work together in symbiosis but remain fundamentally separate? Is it a case of Jewish tradition grafted onto American culture, the suture tight but the seams apparent?

Or is “Candlelight” a hybrid like a pluot, in which the component elements are identifiable yet inseparable, combining to make something somehow both new and old, one and two? Just as you can’t take apart the pluot and point to the plum parts, maybe it’s not so easy to separate a Maccabeat’s experience of singing niggunim on Shabbos afternoon from his humming along to a pop station a few minutes after nightfall. The one
might be constantly informing and transforming the other, resulting in “Candlelight” and a bunch of other other catchy, category-bending tunes.

The beauty of the song, and perhaps some element of its popularity, results from it being readily interpretable through both lenses. Like Jewish-Americans themselves, the song offers a simultaneous feeling of cultural distinctiveness and deep, thorough integration into a sprawling and vibrant Americanism. Attempting to define the slippery notion of the hybrid as it relates to minority cultures, the post-colonial theorist Anjali Prabhu suggests two primary orientations for thinking about the phenomenon: diaspora and creolization. Diasporic thinking, she argues, looks back in time to an originary point, with a particular focus on the anchoring effect of collective traumas, passed down from generation to generation. It stares backward, overlooking the diverse historical experiences of group members in order to identify something upon which a sense of unity, strained though it might be, can be built. Creolization, on the other hand, is focused on the now. It points to the inevitable truth that people don’t live in an originary past and that what it means to be a member of a minority group today is the result of a historical process deeply informed by a variety of external influences. Furthermore, it is a perspective steeped in the idea that minorities not only transform fundamentally in the cauldron of a host culture, but also that these hosts will be transformed in turn by the presence of new minorities. The diasporist says we are American-Jews because we live in the United States and can point back to a tradition indelibly inscribed on an ancient past. The creolist counters that we are American-Jews because we have changed in America and America has changed us.

“Candlelight” is remarkable in its ability to attest to both things at once. Its narrative, the Hanukkah story, is a paradigmatic tale of collective, ancient, diasporic trauma. It is a battle against the Mighty Greeks who threaten to strip the Jews of their origin story in the name of an all-consuming Hellenism. The Jews fight back and are wounded. But they survive, emerging with a signature image by which to remember the ordeal. In the song’s aforementioned soaring bridge, the Maccabeats ask us all to envision collectively the miraculous menorah, its single drop of oil overcoming the indignities of the temple’s defilement and the fear of fading away. It is a magical, perhaps mythical, moment back to which we can all return when our differences start to obscure our unity.

This backward-looking diasporic orientation is hard to deny. But what of the more intertwined, creolized version of hybridity? From this perspective, a picture emerges in which even the ostensibly secular, non-Jewish elements of “Candlelight” come to evoke the fundamental complexities of American-Jewish life and identity. First, there’s the song’s engagement with popular music and particularly the holiday pop genre. If Jews can co-create “White Christmas” and “Santa Baby,” then certainly there’s something nicely parallel in the fact that Taio Cruz and Mike Tompkins (upon whose arrangement “Candlelight” is based) are credited on the most famous Hanukkah song of the 21st century. Interfaith cultural collaboration is not something that American-Jews do, it’s part of who American-Jews are, with plenty of gold records to prove it. “Candlelight” serves to extend and expand this aspect of American-Jewish identity.

The a capella nature of the track also attests to a certain creolized aspect of American-Jewish culture. The genre is, of course, synonymous with the American college campus, an institution held in famously, if perhaps stereotypically, high regard by the Jewish community. American-Jews attend college at an unusually high rate and make up larger portions of faculty than pure population numbers would suggest they should. Does this make college or a capella somehow Jewish? Certainly not in any exclusive fashion. It does, however, point to the undeniable fact that American-Jewish life has been profoundly impacted by the secular American college campus and vice versa. That Yeshiva University has a famous a capella troop simply cannot be understood via a worldview in which cultures are stable entities or art forms are considered the “property” of one demographic group or another. The Maccabeats are neither a pure expression of essential Jewish culture nor evidence of adulteration by the non-Jewish world. They are part of an ever-evolving cultural collaboration in which Jews of various backgrounds have long participated. The creation and success of “Candlelight” are testaments to this complexity.
Are all of these elements consciously apparent to the listener? Perhaps not. And yet there is nonetheless a sense in which the Maccabeats’ utterly unapologetic embrace of seeming contradiction remains a central aspect of the song’s joyous nature. “Candlelight” is many things at once. It is both a serious ode to faith and a smirking joke about popular culture. It is simultaneously wholly original and utterly, plagiaristically derivative. It is, like the rest of American-Jewish life, both diasporic and creolized. Belonging to a minority culture often requires a willingness to accept paradox not as a temporary means of getting by, but as a fulfilling, potentially permanent way of life. “Candlelight,” with admirable joy, puts this contradiction to music. It is also, of course, pretty catchy.

Matt Sienkiewicz is an assistant professor of communication and international studies at Boston College. He is the author of The Other Air Force, coeditor of the book Saturday Night Live and American TV, and has produced a number of documentaries, including Live from Bethlehem. His scholarship has appeared in journals including Media, Culture, & Society, Popular Communication, The International Journal of Cultural Studies, and Critical Studies in Media Communication. Follow him on Twitter: @mediastudied.
CULTURAL MIGRATIONS OF A HANUKKAH PILGRIMAGE

ELLI FISCHER

In December 1907, on the eve of Hanukkah, 18 students of the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium departed ... from Jaffa toward Modi'im ...

In the late afternoon, just before sunset, we reached Modi'im, where we met an Arab shepherd. We asked him, “Where are the tombs of the Maccabees?” He answered with a question: “Are you looking for the tombs of the Jews?” We responded in the affirmative. He directed us to a group of tombs carved from the stone, with covers atop them, and told us that this is the place we were seeking. We became very excited. We lit the first Hanukkah candle at the site and danced there. It started getting dark quickly, so we turned back ...

-- From the oral history of Zerubavel Haviv, cited by Dr. Muli Brog

The Zionist movement, in its secularist forms, produced a number of practices and rituals that, on the one hand, are unquestionably bound to Jewish tradition, and, on the other hand, openly rebel against that very tradition. The holiday of Hanukkah provides numerous examples of this phenomenon, as those who advocated for a new type of Jew—muscular, soil-bound, independent—viewed the Maccabees (minus their religious fervor) as a powerful historical precedent and symbol. A glance at the number of sports teams and athletic competitions named for the Maccabees drives the point home easily. The transformation of Hanukkah into a nationalist celebration of military prowess was not subtle in the least, though it is often glossed over nowadays.¹ Note, for example, how the last line of the original Yiddish version of the song “Oy, Khasnike”—“Say ’Al Ha-nisim,’ praise God for the miracles, and we will all dance together in a circle”—becomes, in its Hebrew rendering, “For the miracles and wonders that the Maccabees wrought.” And if that were not enough, the Hebrew version adds a second stanza, all about Jewish victory and return to Jerusalem, with no mention of God.² Another song paraphrases the verse “Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord?” (Psalms 106:2) with, “Who can utter the mighty acts of Israel?” Not subtle at all.

1. Likely because Hanukkah is experienced so differently by so many Jewish groups that it has become something of an ideological Rorschach test. I contend that it is possible to celebrate a different “Hanukkah” on each of the eight days. Perhaps the Talmudic Sages were on to something when they introduced their discussion of this holiday with the words “My (Mai) Hanukkah.”

2. The English version, it should be noted, remains decidedly ideologically neutral. We are simply reminded of “days long ago.” It’s quite a trick to rhyme night, light, and bright without even noting that there was a fight.
It is in this context that the new movement created its own pilgrimage sites to compete with traditional sites like Mt. Meron, Rachel’s Tomb, the Cave of the Patriarchs, and the Tomb of Samuel the Prophet. The site (mis)identified as the “Tombs of the Maccabees,” became, along with Masada, one of the foremost shrines of the new movement, and it is in this context that the annual Hanukkah pilgrimage to the graves identified by an Arab shepherd one winter evening in 1907 developed.

In §349 of Responsa Si’ah Yitzhak, Rabbi Yitzhak Weiss, who perished in the Holocaust in 1942, records various Hanukkah customs from different communities. After describing a custom from Salonika and another that originated among Sephardic Kabbalists, he adds the following:

In the land of Israel, they travel to the village of Modi‘im, for there is the resting place of the righteous priests who fell in the war waged against the wicked Antiochus. This village is inhabited only by Arabs, and the Arabs have a tradition that when this place is inhabited by Jews, the redemption will come.

In the writing of this Hungarian Hasidic rabbi in interwar Czechoslovakia, who was not a Zionist, though he was very much enamored of the land of Israel, the ritual pilgrimage to a shrine that had been invented barely a generation earlier within an avowedly anti-traditional matrix had itself been absorbed into the discourse of halakhah and equated with mystical practices and timeless traditions.

Perhaps this cycle of ideological appropriation and repurposing of symbols can itself tell us something about Hanukkah. Perhaps the latkes or sufganiyot can still taste as good even if we know how, and how recently, they became traditions. The accreted rituals of the holiday are more than the detritus of obsolete ideologies and failed metanarratives. They remain solid and will continue, in one form or another, long after whatever produced them has melted into air. The holy can be profaned, but the profane can be resacralized. As R. Nahman of Breslov (Sihot §40) explained regarding yet another much-maligned Hanukkah custom:

For in truth, the entire universe is a spinning top, a dreidl. Everything moves in a circle ... All things in the world are part of this circular motion, reborn and transformed into one another.

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3. The Book of the Maccabees and Josephus describe the tombs as monumental structures. The site is mentioned by Eusebius in the 4th century, on the 6th century Medaba Map, and in the travelogues of Crusader-era Christian pilgrims. However, despite numerous attempts over the course of 150 years, the tombs have not yet been definitively identified. It has, however, been conclusively demonstrated that the “Tombs of the Maccabees” are not the tombs of the Maccabees.

4. One of our editors, Shlomo Zuckier, will have us know that Hanukkah is not a “hag” and not a pilgrimage festival. Of course, neither is Rosh Hashana, but try telling that to the thousands who travel to Uman.

5. I thank Rabbi Daniel Yolkut for bringing this source to my attention.

6. Contra Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto (“All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned…”).
Antiochus, the not nice king
He did to the Jews a terrible thing
He made the holy bais hamikdash unclean
And besides, he was so mean

Sometime around the year that my children came home from preschool singing this song, a relative of mine casually mentioned that he viewed the Greeks as equivalent to the Nazis. I tried to protest that while there was not always much love between the Greeks and the Jews, there is also no reliable evidence that the Greeks wanted to wipe out the Jewish faith. In response, he suggested that I must have forgotten what Jews say each year at the Passover Seder, that in every generation, Gentiles want to annihilate the Jewish people. According to my relative, then, the underlying message of the rabbinic statement preserved in the Haggadah is that Gentiles who seek the demise of Jews really seek the demise of Judaism. They are motivated by a common, irrational burning hatred of Judaism that defies logic, probably tied to their suppressed jealousy of the Jews, and can only be a result of God’s desire that the Jews remain separated from the foreign nations, and more closely connected to the divine instead.

Suffering at the hands of our enemies, therefore, is both a sign of our sins and of our chosenness.

The historical picture of what happened in the early decades of the second century BCE, however, is not so simple. In this article, my aim is to argue that by painting the story of Hanukkah as a story about the Jewish religion confronting an inevitable clash with Greek culture, we play into a false binary that neglects to capture what actually happened in 175–164 BCE. There were indeed anti-Jewish sentiments on the rise at this time. And Antiochus did try to repress the practice of Judaism. However, the edicts he issued were more political than theological. I believe, therefore, that we should focus on the remarkable and unlikely victory of the Hasmoneans rather than the notion that this holiday celebrates the Jewish victory against those who wished to wipe out the Jewish religion.

While Antiochus IV Epiphanes may not have embarked on a project that specifically aimed to eradicate Judaism, the very fact that the Jews defeated his army is reason to memorialize an event that can be understood as divine intervention on behalf of the Jewish people. There is no reason, therefore, that Hanukkah cannot be celebrated in both a historically accurate and theologically meaningful way.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE, he did not leave a will. Without a successor, his massive empire was divided among his most prestigious generals known as the Diadochi. These generals ruled the Seleucid kingdom to the north and
northeast, the kingdoms of Macedon and Pergamon to the northwest, and the Ptolemaic kingdom to the southwest. My relative descriptions of these kingdoms, of course, place Judea in the middle of these territories, which it more or less was.

Judea was prime real estate for all of these kingdoms, and greatly desired as a trade route and a key connector between the Diadochi’s kingdoms. The territory of Judea soon became under dispute, with the Ptolemies and the Seleucids fighting over the region in the third and second centuries BCE in what is known today as the Six Syrian Wars. For the bulk of this period, Judea was squarely under Ptolemaic rule.

What would it have meant to Jews living throughout the Greek world to be “Greek?” It would have meant living under one of the kingdoms that were formed following the death of Alexander, and participating in an umbrella culture that encompassed language, material life such as clothes and architecture, literature, philosophy, and the perfection of both the soul and the body. Being Greek meant participating in a culture that pervaded every public space, and many private ones, as well.

At the same time, this was more of an ideal than a reality: since the Greek kingdoms following Alexander comprised such a massive swath of land, the majority of those who found themselves living under Greek rule at the end of the fourth century BCE had to navigate this new umbrella culture with their traditional native ones. The Jews were not the only people who were faced with the challenge of piloting this balancing act.

What made the Jews different from many other Greek-conquered ethnic groups, however, is that while they felt deep ties to Judea, the majority of Jews did not actually live in Judea. They lived throughout the Greek world, in Antioch, in Alexandria, in Rome, and in eastern provinces that were once Babylonia. The Temple was a centripetal force of Jewish identity that made Jews feel drawn towards and connected to the land of Israel, and many thousands of Jews throughout the diasporan world made pilgrimages to Jerusalem on the holidays of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot.

On the other hand, the identifying markers of Judaism was not one’s proximity to the Temple. It was the practice of Shabbat and holidays, dietary law, and circumcision. For this reason, even though Antiochus’s policies applied only to the Jews in Judea, the prohibitions to observe these laws were viewed by many as an act of hostility towards all Jews, and not just those living in Judea.

In around 200 BCE, the Seleucid Greek Empire gained control of the region of Judea. Jews found themselves under the rule of a Greek Empire, just as before. One of the rulers of this Empire, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who rose to power in 175 BCE, was unlike the Ptolemies in that he was more interested in dictating the personal lives of his subjects. He insisted instead that all of his subjects abandon their ancestral traditions.

The sources about the Hasmonean rebellion written most contemporaneously are I Maccabees—which whose author may have witnessed the accounts he describes firsthand—and II Maccabees—which was written about a generation later and certainly did not witness the accounts firsthand. The II Maccabees that we possess today is a condensed version of a massive, five-volume work that was composed by a Jew named Jason of Cyrene.

The authors of both works held certain agendas. I Maccabees seeks to valorize the Hasmonean family. II Maccabees seeks to theologize the story by inserting references to God, the Temple, and prayer throughout his story. In addition, they both contain kernels of historical accuracy that I believe demonstrate that Antiochus IV Epiphanes was not motivated primarily by a desire to eliminate the Jewish religion.

According to I Maccabees, Antiochus IV Epiphanes’s invasion of Judea and his legislation prohibiting all people to give up their local customs were two entirely different events. The first occurred because Antiochus engaged in battle with Ptolemy over territory, and the second occurred because Antiochus wanted to ensure a cohesive kingdom whose regions would not splinter and revert back to Ptolemaic rule. I Maccabees describes the conflict in 1:10-51, and can be bullet-pointed as follows:
After Antiochus became king, some Judeans proactively sought to Hellenize Jerusalem on the grounds that the separation of Jews and Gentiles led to the oppression of Jews (1:11–15).

Antiochus attacks Egypt and then returns back up north to invade Judea. He pillages the Temple and ravages the land (1:16–28).

Two years later, Antiochus attacks Judea again and conquers it. The people strongly resist his attack, but prove no match for Antiochus’s forces (1:29–40).

The King issues legislation that all of his subjects should abandon their local customs on pain of death (1:41–51).

A careful examination of I Maccabees, then, reveals that the invasion of Judea was part of Antiochus’s larger campaign to wrest territory away from the Ptolemies, and his move to prohibit the observance of ancestral law applied to all of his subjects.

II Maccabees chapters 3–6 affirms that Antiochus did not invade Judea in order to quash the Jewish religion. Instead, the author describes at length an intra-Jewish debate between Menelaus and Onias’s brother, Jason, on the one hand (two claimants to the Jewish high priesthood who wanted to see Judea fully Hellenized), and the pious priest Onias on the other, who would later be assassinated by one of Menelaus’s cronies, Andronicus. This debate ultimately led to Antiochus’s invasion. The events in II Maccabees are as follows:

- The righteous high priest Onias has a disagreement with a Jew named Simon, who seeks revenge on Onias by leaking information to king Seleucus IV Philopator’s officials that the administrators of the Jerusalem Temple are hoarding money. Antiochus sends his assistant Heliodorus to Jerusalem to raid the Temple, but he is miraculously stopped by two angels who flog him. Heliodorus then declares his commitment to the Jewish God (3:1–40).
- Simon’s plotting against Onias continues; Onias appeals to Seleucus for help (4:1–6).
- Seleucus dies and Antiochus IV Epiphanes ascends the throne. Jason, Onias’s Hellenist brother, purchases the high priesthood by bribing the king. Jason embarks on a project to Hellenize Judea by building gymnasiums, encouraging Greek dress, and ceasing to support Temple service (4:7–20).
- Antiochus initiates battle with the new Ptolemaic king Philometor. On his way to Egypt, Antiochus stops in Judea and is greeted warmly by Jason (4:21–22).
- Simon’s Hellenized brother Menelaus approaches the king and outbids Jason for the high priesthood, supplanting him for the position. Jason escapes Judea, fearing that Menelaus will kill him (4:23–29).
- Menelaus enlists his aide Andronicus to assassinate Onias, which he does. When Antiochus hears of the murder of his friend Onias, he is so enraged at Andronicus that he has Andronicus publicly killed on the site where Andronicus had killed Onias. (4:30–38).
- The Jews protest the corrupt acts of Menelaus’s brother Lysimachus, who in turn gathers an army against the Jewish protesters. A small battle ensues which results in Lysimachus’s death. While the Jews bring charges against Menelaus, Menelaus bribes his way out of the crisis and is allowed to remain the high priest (4:39–50).
- Antiochus again invades Egypt. At this time, a miraculous image of golden cavalry appears in the sky over Jerusalem (5:1–4).
- Jason hears a false rumor that Antiochus is dead, and amasses an army to attack Menelaus in Jerusalem. Jason loses the battle and retreats to Egypt where he dies in exile. (5:5–10).
- Antiochus hears of the unrest in Judea and assumes that Judea is in revolt against him. He leaves Egypt and invades Judea, killing thousands of Jews and pillaging the Temple (5:11–26).
- Judah Maccabee escapes the carnage by retreating to the countryside with some companions (5:27).
- Sometime after this catastrophe, Antiochus issues legislation prohibiting the Jews from observing their ancestral law and announcing that the Jerusalem Temple will be used as a Temple dedicated to Zeus (6:1–2).
According to II Maccabees, the Seleucid king Seleucus IV Philopator and his successor Antiochus IV Epiphanes enjoyed a warm friendship with the local Judean leadership until the tension in Judea among Onias and Menelaus, and then Menelaus and Jason, became so toxic that Antiochus perceived the unrest to be a direct threat to the wellbeing of his own Empire.

The tone and content of II Maccabees is markedly different from the narrative found in I Maccabees. As one can easily see from the bullet points above, the book’s emphases on the welfare of the Jerusalem Temple and the insertion of miracles which occur during key military events in the Greek world point to the author’s belief that the conflict between Antiochus and the Jews was an existential one, and that even the battles which the Seleucids and Ptolemies waged against one another were all part of a divine plan. No such explicit theologizing appears in I Maccabees.

In both books, the story of the Hasmonean uprising does not begin with Antiochus’s effort to issue legislation to eradicate Judaism. Instead, they begin with descriptions of intra-Jewish conflict and the way in which this conflict intersects with Antiochus’s campaigns against Egypt. The key to the conflict, then, was intra-Jewish fighting, not a baseless hatred for the Jewish people.

Most scholars believe that as the less hyperbolized and more straightforward account, I Maccabees is more historically reliable than II Maccabees. II Maccabees is the first Greek text to use the word “Judaism,” and it does so in contrast to “Hellenism.” The word “Judaism” does not appear in earlier Greek texts. The use of this word reflects a larger polemical agenda in II Maccabees which argues that what happened in 175–164 BCE was the result of a conflict between the Jewish God and the Greeks’ false gods. II Maccabees theologizes this story, moreover, by inserting miracles, prayers, divinely sent angels, and martyrologies.

While I Maccabees should serve as the historical basis for our understanding of the story, particularly when it comes to the fact that Antiochus IV Epiphanes never targeted the Jews alone, but issued edicts which applied to all of his subjects, II Maccabees likely preserves key information regarding the intra-Jewish conflicts in Judea occurring at this time that centered on the corruption of the high priesthood.

Finally, both texts agree on two key points. First, Judean leadership in the second century BCE was unstable, and there was heated debate regarding the degree to which the region should be Hellenized and led by Hellenized Jews. The question wasn’t whether to Hellenize—since a certain amount of Greek influence was inevitable and perhaps even desirable—but to what degree should Hellenization affect the Jews’ manner of life. Second, both accounts make clear that Antiochus IV Epiphanes’s edicts aimed to quell political tensions in Judea and create a cohesive kingdom. This way, he could ensure a degree of loyalty from his subjects.

Celebrating Hanukkah as a story of Jewish victory over the Greeks who wanted to destroy the Jews offers another point of irony, since the question of how to address Hellenization was not resolved once the Hasmoneans rose to power. In fact, the Hasmoneans experienced a total defeat in this zero-sum battle. Two generations after Judah the Maccabee lived, the Hasmonean family ran a Hellenized court rife with corruption, while many Jews living in Greek diasporan centers like Alexandria were practicing their ancestral religion by going to synagogue and keeping dietary laws. The Talmud itself accounts for this.

Rather than attempting to squeeze the complex events leading up to the Hasmonean rebellion into an artificial and existential conflict, I suggest that we should celebrate the historical aspects of Hanukkah as representing a shocking achievement of Jewish autonomy in the face of forced integration, an achievement that Jews at the time (and now) view as nothing short of miraculous.

Even if we do acknowledge that the conflict of 175 BCE did not derive from Antiochus’s interest in eradicating Judaism, the fact that a small Jewish army in Judea defeated Antiochus’s massive forces and gained independence is so remarkable that it is no wonder that observant Jews interpret this story as a sign of divine intervention and care for the Jewish people.
When we celebrate and teach about Hanukkah, our focus should be not on the inaccurate notion that the Greeks wanted to destroy the Jewish religion, but on ways in which the Jews’ salvation from the Greeks underscores the everlasting covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and the One True God.

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Rav said: Kalends was established by the first human being (Adam ha-Rishon).

When he saw that the night was getting longer, he said:

“Woe to me lest the one about whom it is written ‘He shall wound (yeshufekha) your head and you shall wound (teshufenu) his heel’ (Genesis 3:15) will come to bite me.”

“And I said: ‘Surely (in) darkness (he) will envelop me (yeshufeni)” (Psalms 139:11).

When he saw that the day was getting longer, he said:

“Kalendes!”—kalon deo (or—calo diem). (y. Avoda Zarah 1:1/39c)

This brief story tells of Adam’s terror when, shortly after coming into being, he notices that the days are changing. Adam, according to this tradition, was created in the fall. He begins to see that each day brings a longer and longer night. Never having experienced the changing of the seasons before and having no source of knowledge other than his own experience, Adam thinks that this pattern will continue and that the nights will keep getting longer and longer, the daytime shorter and shorter. He is terrified.

What is it that makes Adam feel so vulnerable? The passage gives us an insight into Adam’s terror by calling our attention to a word that appears in two verses, one from the story of Adam in Genesis and the other from Psalm 139. It should be noted that this particular psalm is commonly understood in rabbinic tradition as reflecting upon the experience of the first human being. In the verse that is quoted here, the speaker talks about his own experience; he talks about something that he had previously thought: “And I said: ‘Surely darkness will envelop me . . .’” The word that I have translated as “envelop” is yeshufeni, the same verb that describes the state of enmity that God tells Adam, in the aftermath of Adam’s sin, will exist between Adam and the snake: “He shall wound (yeshufekha) your head and you shall wound (teshufenu) his heel.” The passage takes the words of the psalm, understood as Adam’s own words, and reinterprets them in relation to the Genesis verse. While the plain meaning of the verse is something like “Surely darkness will envelop me,” darkness serving as the subject of the verb yeshufeni, the Talmudic story reads “Surely in darkness he will wound me,” with “he” referring to the snake.

Adam’s world is no longer a safe place. In the aftermath of his sin, Adam feels vulnerable. God has told Adam that he will be in unmitigating conflict with the snake, and Adam fears that the darkness will give the snake opportunity to attack him. As the nights get increasingly longer, a greater part of each day leaves Adam vulnerable to that which he most fears.
Returning to the Psalms verse which, in our passage, articulates Adam’s fear, I think that the plain meaning and the midrashic understanding are not so far apart. The midrashic reading gives voice to a very particular fear, fear of the snake, but we might understand this more broadly as a very primal fear, not so different from anyone’s fear of the dark. Darkness envelops us, and we feel vulnerable to whatever it is that most terrifies us: ghosts, monsters, our own thoughts, our nightmares, our inadequacies, our mortality, our guilt. Adam’s fear of the snake, similarly, can be understood as the terror that grips him in the aftermath of his sin. He has failed, he has been cast out of Eden, he has been pronounced mortal—and the world is getting darker and darker.

Rabbinic tradition’s understanding of Psalm 139 as a description of Adam’s experience can be seen as a narrowing of the subject of the psalm. But, alternatively, it can be seen as a broadening of the experiences that the psalm describes. Adam ha-Rishon is both Adam, the first human individual about whom the Torah tells a story, and all humankind. Reading the psalm as a window into Adam’s experiences is an invitation to each of us to imagine ourselves in the words of the psalm. Each of us experiences times in which we are plunged into darkness, times in which the world is getting darker and darker around us. Each of us knows the terror of those moments in which we do not know whether the darkness will ever give way to the light.

And I said: “Surely darkness will envelop me, and the light shall be night about me.”

The second part of the verse that begins by describing the experience of being enveloped by darkness can be read in two different ways, each of which is attested in contemporary biblical translations. The first reading takes the second part of the verse as reiterating the first part or taking it a step further. The speaker is saying that he is shrouded in darkness even in times of light. Reading the verse as spoken by Adam, the verse tells of the days leading to the winter solstice. Not only is Adam vulnerable in darkness, but even light—that is, even what until now has been daytime—is becoming night. And, as far as Adam knows, this process will continue until there is only nighttime and no more light, until he will be totally enveloped by darkness.

Alternatively, the second part of the verse can be read in the opposite way:

And I said: “Surely darkness will envelop me,” but the night has become light for me.

In this reading, only the first part of the verse constitutes the words that the speaker recalls saying or thinking earlier. Adam, in our story, thought that he would be enveloped by darkness. But the days pass and the solstice comes and gradually the daylight hours begin to increase. Adam thought that darkness would take over, but currently realizes that what had been nighttime is now becoming light.

The second part of this verse, then, can be read to express both of Adam’s experiences: his experience of day turning into night and his experience of night turning into day. It describes the terrifying experience of feeling vulnerable to what he imagines will be the ever-increasing darkness and also the feeling of celebration as darkness begins to give way to light. Rereading the verse with both of these possibilities in mind—taking the ambiguity of the verse not as something to be resolved but as expressing the verse’s full meaning—allows us simultaneously to experience the deep terror of the darkness and the relief and joy of anticipation of light’s return. Both of these, the story tells us, were foundational experiences of the first human being, and both of these are experiences of every human being.

This story is offered in the Yerushalmi as an explanation of the origin of the pagan holiday of Kalends. Rav explains that Kalends originated with Adam. When Adam saw the day getting longer, he exclaimed “Kalendes!” Adam’s exclamation is interpreted in two different ways by the commentators (see the Penei Moshe commentary). Either he is saying kalon deo—Greek for “God is good!”—blessing God for bringing light out of the darkness, or he is saying calo diem—Latin for “I proclaim the day!”—celebrating the lengthening of the day after the solstice.

The Bavli offers a similar story in explanation of the origin of Kalends:
Rabbi Hanan bar Raba said:
Kalends—the eight days following the solstice.
Saturnalia—the eight days preceding the solstice.
And your mnemonic: "You have beset me behind and before etc." (Psalms 139:5).

Our Rabbis taught:
When the first human being [Adam ha-Rishon] saw the day getting shorter and shorter
he said:
"Woe to me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world is
dark about me and is returning to chaos and confusion,
and this is the death that has been sentenced upon me
from the Heavens."
He sat for eight days in fasting.
When he saw the winter solstice and saw the day getting
longer and longer,
he said:
"This is the way of the world."
He went and made eight festive days.
Another year he made these and these into festive days.
He established them for the sake of Heaven,
but they established them for the sake of idolatry. (b. Avoda Zara 8a)

Both the Bavli and Yerushalmi stories appear in relation to a
mishnah that lists pagan festivals:
These are the festivals of the idolaters: Kalends and Saturnalia.
. . . (m. Avoda Zara 1:1)

While the Yerushalmi story offers an explanation only of the
first holiday mentioned, Kalends, the Bavli offers an explanation
of the first two holidays, Kalends and Saturnalia. Rabbi Hanan
bar Rabbah says that the first of these occurs eight days after
the solstice, and the other occurs eight days before the solstice.
This means that the holidays are listed in reverse order in the
mishnah, a fact that suggests the need for the mnemonic that
follows, “behind and before You have beset me.”

In the verse that is quoted as the aid to memory, the word
“behind” (ahor) precedes the word “before” ( qedem). “Behind”
in rabbinic texts refers to what is in the future. For example,
in the famous story of Moses visiting the beit midrash of
Rabbi Akiva, God says to Moses “turn behind you” (hazor
le-ahorekha), inviting him to look into the future (b. Menahot
29b). Conversely, what is in the past is that which is before or
in front of a person. This directionality is counterintuitive
to us, who see the past as that which is behind us, and who
imagine ourselves as oriented toward the future, which lies
before or ahead of us. But in rabbinic imagination, one faces
what has already happened; this is what can be known and
this is how we orient ourselves. The future is what we cannot
see; it is in the back of us. And so the mnemonic is saying that
what is behind—that is, what is in the future, what will come
later—precedes what is before—that is, what is in the past,
what comes earlier. Thus, with this verse in mind, we can
remember that the mishnah lists the later holiday, Kalends,
before the earlier holiday, Saturnalia.

But why this oblique mnemonic? Why would it be likely that
one would remember this verse and its implication for the
order of the holidays listed in the mishnah? The use of this
mnemonic only makes sense if we recognize that the verse
is from Psalm 139, the psalm that is understood as telling
about Adam’s experiences and that is quoted explicitly in the
Yerushalmi version of the story of Adam and the increasing
darkness. The Bavli story does not explicitly quote the psalm,
but the appearance of a verse from Psalm 139 at this point sets
a backdrop for the story that follows, bringing the psalm and
its associated experiences into our consciousness as we set
about reading the story.

This particular verse—offered here as a reminder of the
holidays that Adam established—is interpreted elsewhere in
the Bavli as articulating Adam’s experience of diminution
after his sin. Adam, according to Rabbi Elazar, was gigantic at
creation; he reached from the earth to the heavens. After he
sinned, God placed His hand on him and diminished him (b.
Haqiqah 12a). Rav Yehudah transmits there a similar tradition
in the name of Rav: At creation, Adam stretched from one end
of the earth to the other; when he sinned, he was diminished
under God’s hand. Both derive the idea of Adam’s diminution from this verse:

“You have beset me behind and before, and you placed your hand upon me.”

The word translated here as “beset me”—tzartani, construing the word as connoting narrowness—has also been understood as “formed,” recalling the creation of the human being: “The Lord God formed (va-yitzer) the human being from the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7). Rashi to Hagigah 12a explains the talmudic interpretation of the verse as telling of Adam’s diminution as based on this latter understanding of the word tzartani: “You have formed me behind and before” refers to two separate acts of creation, an earlier one in which Adam is gigantic, and a later one in which he is small—or, in Rashi’s words, creations in which Adam is high and then low. Alternatively, the Talmudic Sages might be interpreting the first part of the verse as referring to Adam’s initial creation, the words “behind and before” suggesting that he stretched from one extreme point to the other (from earth to heaven or from one end of the earth to the other), and only the second half of the verse—”and you placed your hand upon me”—as referring to Adam’s diminution after his sin.

Yet a third possibility is that the Sages are reading the word tzartani in both ways simultaneously, as conveying the meaning both of formation and of narrowing. The human being, according to this reading, is a creature whose essence is both of vast capacity and of extreme limitation. Adam both can reach from earth to heaven—or from one end of the earth to the other—and can be so very small. Such a reading fits with the reading I offered above of the verse about light and darkness. There, too, the verse can be construed in two ways, and I suggested that the Talmudic story includes both of these readings and, indeed, invites us to imagine both meanings simultaneously.

This bivalence can be read as central to Psalm 139’s meaning and purpose. The human being in this psalm is portrayed as worthy of God’s notice and, at the same time, fragile and vulnerable in relation to God. The speaker talks about the impossibility of escaping from God’s presence in verses that have been read both as suggesting an attempt to flee from God and as conveying the awesome assurance of finding God everywhere. The paradoxical nature of the psalm’s portrayal of the human condition and especially of the human experience of being in God’s presence is highlighted in Israel Najara’s liturgical poem based on this psalm, Ana Elekh. The poem begins ana elekh me-ruchekha, evrah mimmekha elekha—”Where can I go from your spirit? I escape from you to you.” This very duality might lie at the heart of the rabbinic attribution of the psalm to Adam, the human being formed (va-yitzer—Genesis 3:7) from the dust of the earth but ensouled with God’s spirit, the person who lives in a place in which God walks and who tries to hide from the presence of God, only to find that the very place in which he hides (amidst the trees of the garden!) reveals to God his thoughts and actions. (See Genesis 3:8; compare 2:9 and 3:3)

It is this duality that is captured by the talmudic understanding of the verse, a verse which is introduced just before the story about Adam in the Bavli. Adam filled the entire earth, but Adam sinned and was diminished. It is worth noting that the word used for “sin” in the passage about Adam’s diminution is sarah, the same word that is used in the story about Adam establishing the festivals for which the Psalms verse is cited as a mnemonic: “perhaps because I have sinned (sarahti) . . . .” And so citing this verse brings to mind the complex experience of the human being described in the psalm and, in particular, the notion of Adam sinning and what happens to Adam as a consequence of his sin.

The Bavli story is very similar to the Yerushalmi story, but there are a few notable differences. In the Yerushalmi story, Adam is worried that the snake will come and attack him in the darkness. In the Bavli, it is darkness itself that terrifies Adam. “The world is dark about me”—ba-adi— recalls the Psalms verse about light and darkness: “And I said: ‘Surely darkness will envelop me, and the light shall be night about me—ba-ademi.” Adam is saying that the world is dark about himself—meaning both that it is dark for him and also that the world is dark because of him. Adam imagines that, because he has sinned, darkness has come to the world. And he believes that this darkness, overtaking the world more and more each day, signals that the world is returning to primordial chaos.
The first act of creation in Genesis is the creation of light (Genesis 1:3). Before that, "the earth was unformed and void—
tohu va-vohu—and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). If the earth is returning to darkness, then it is
returning to tohu va-vohu—the very words that Adam uses
in our story. Adam has caused the dissolution of creation, the
return of the world to its precreation state of darkness and
chaos. This, he believes, is the death that he had been warned
about should he fail to obey God’s word (Genesis 2:17).

In the waning days of winter, the newly created Adam imagines
the world as an extension of himself; the death to which he
had been condemned is the extinction of the world. His own
offense—sarahti evokes decay or rot—returns the world
to chaos and confusion. But at the solstice, there is a shift
in Adam's consciousness. When Adam sees the days getting
longer and longer, he says “This is the way of the world.” It
is not clear what causes this change in the way Adam sees
the world. Why does he not believe, instead, that God has
responded to his fasting, that God has forgiven him and halted
the process set in motion by Adam’s sin? Perhaps Adam’s new
understanding comes about because Adam sees the daylight
increasing gradually; if God had forgiven him and halted
the world’s return to darkness, the lengthening nights would
simply be expected to stop lengthening, or perhaps to return
to their pre-sin duration. Instead, Adam notices a gradual shift
in the length of daytime, and that does not seem to him to be a
response to his fasting. Rather, he concludes, this—both
the lengthening of daytime that he experiences now and the
lengthening of nighttime that he had experienced earlier—is
the way of the world.

Adam now is alienated from the world. He understands the
world to be separate from himself; it is not affected by his
actions or his state of being. The increasing light is not a function
of his fasting, and the decreasing light was not a function of his
sin. Thus, he not only celebrates the time of increasing light, but
he subsequently turns the earlier days into festive days as well.
The world will continue as it is, with longer and longer nights
giving way to longer and longer days. This realization, the story
tells us, is the origin of the two eight-day festivals of Kalends and
Saturnalia.

Eight-day festivals? Rav Hanan bar Rava had dated Kalends
to eight days after the solstice and Saturnalia to eight days
before. Saturnalia was, in fact, a Roman festival held on
December 17th, eight days before the winter solstice, which,
on the Julian calendar, fell on December 25th. And Kalends
was a first-of-the-month festival. The Kalends of January falls
eight days after the December 25th solstice. But Rav Hanan
bar Rava’s statement does not suggest that these are eight-day
holidays. That is a subtle change introduced in the story about
Adam’s establishment of these festivals, and it does not corre-
spond to the actual Roman holidays. Kalends was a one-day
festival, and Saturnalia varied in duration from one to seven
days during different periods. Neither was an eight-day long
festival. According to this story, though, Saturnalia began on
December 17th and continued, for eight days, through the
24th, and Kalends began on December 25th and continued, for
eight days, through January 1st.

So why does this story tell of Adam’s celebration of eight-day
holidays? I believe that this story was shaped in the Bavli in
relation to the practice of lighting Hanukkah candles and to
the Hanukkah story. [I am indebted to my colleague Rabbi
Shimon Deutsch for first introducing me to the possibility
that the Bavli story and the Bavli’s discussion of Hanukkah are
related to each other.] Here is the Bavli’s discussion of how to
light the Hanukkah candles, followed by the story of Hanuk-
kah’s origins:

Our Rabbis taught:
The mitzvah of Hanukkah is a candle for each person
and his household;
and those who beautify—a candle for each and every one;
and those who most beautify—
Beit Shammai say:
The first day he lights eight; from then on he decreases
and decreases
and Beit Hillel say:
The first night he lights one; from then on he increases
and increases . . .
What is Hanukkah?
As our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev are the eight days of Hanukkah,
[wherein one should not eulogize nor fast.]
For when the Greeks entered the temple,
they defiled all of the oil in the Temple.
And when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed and defeated them,
they searched and found only one cruse of oil that lay with the seal of the High Priest,
and there was only enough in it to light for one day.
A miracle occurred with it, and they lit from it for eight days.

Another year they established them
and made them into festive days with praise and thanksgiving. (b. Shabbat 21b)

There are several similarities between this description of the origins of Hanukkah and the Bavli’s story about Adam and the winter solstice. Hanukkah, of course, is an eight-day holiday, like Kalends and Saturnalia according to the Bavli’s story about the origin of these festivals. It falls on the 25th of the month of Kislev, a date similar to the pivot point of the two festivals that Adam is said to have established, one eight days before and the other eight days after the December 25th solstice.

After each of the stories describes the way the holidays originated, the stories conclude by saying that, at a later time—le-shanah aheret—there was a change. Adam originally fasted during the first eight days and celebrated the second eight days as festive days—yamim tovim. But “another year” he established both sets of eight days as festivals. Similarly, the original eight days of Hanukkah were the days in which the miracle of the oil unfolded. But “another year” they established these as festive days, on which fasting is forbidden. Both stories use the word kava, “established,” in describing how the holidays reached their final form. Adam “established” the holidays for the sake of Heaven, but others “established” them for the sake of idolatry. Hanukkah was “established” and made into festive days with praise and thanksgiving. Finally, both passages talk about decreasing light and increasing light. In the Adam story, the day is mitma’et ve-holekh—it gets shorter and shorter—and then it is ma’arikh ve-holekh—it gets longer and longer. In the Hanukkah passage, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel dispute how the candles ought to be lit. According to Beit Shammai, on the first day one lights eight candles and, from then on, pohet ve-holekh—he decreases and decreases; that is, one lights fewer and fewer candles each day. According to Beit Hillel, on the first day one lights one candle and, from then on, mosif ve-holekh—he increases and increases; that is, one lights more and more candles each day.

These similarities, both in content and in formulation, suggest that the two passages are shaped in relation to each other. Note that the Yerushalmi version of the Adam story contains not a single one of the elements listed above that are shared between the Bavli version of that story and the passage about Hanukkah. The story about Adam in the Bavli seems to be deliberately shaped to echo elements of the Hanukkah passage, and it is possible that the Hanukkah passage itself was partially shaped in relation to the Adam passage. Thus, the Bavli is inviting us to hear the story of Adam when we read the Hanukkah story and to keep the Hanukkah story in mind when we read the story of Adam. This interplay between texts enables each reader to find something different in the dynamic space that is created between them. I will offer some of my own thoughts as to what might be suggested by that interplay.

First, the Adam story broadens the significance of the Hanukkah story. While Hanukkah marks a particular event in Jewish history, the Adam story invites us to understand Hanukkah as celebrating a universal human experience as well. Adam—the first human being and every human being—experiences the terror of being engulfed by the darkness. And Adam experiences the return of the light after a period of darkness that threatens never to end. Hanukkah, understood in relation to the story of Adam, becomes a holiday in which victory over tyrants, rededication of the Temple, and lighting the tiny remnant of oil signify an event of ongoing significance in each individual life and in the universal experience of humankind.
Second, the Adam story helps us notice that Hanukkah is a holiday about both increasing light and decreasing light. Beit Shammai’s and Beit Hillel’s positions are alternatives in practice, but the two ways of lighting the candles coexist in our text—within the talmudic passage, we are offered both an image of diminishing light and an image of increasing light. In fact, Hanukkah falls at the very darkest time of the year. With respect to the solar calendar, Hanukkah falls not far from the winter solstice, when the nights are longest. With respect to the lunar calendar, Hanukkah begins shortly before the new moon, at a time when the last sliver of the waning moon is about to disappear. An eight-day holiday that begins on the 25th of a lunar month takes us through a period of disappearing light into a time of greatest darkness and then into a time in which the light begins to reappear, with the emergence of the waxing moon. [I am indebted to Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun for the observation that Hanukkah falls on the very darkest days of the year, taking the lunar cycle into account. See his analysis in a Megadim article, where he discusses this point and offers an interpretation of Beit Shammai’s and Beit Hillel’s opinions about how to light the Hanukkah candles in relation to the eight days of decreasing light and the eight days of increasing light described in the Bavli story.] Hanukkah, then, mirrors Adam’s experience of diminishing and growing light, but does so specifically on the Jewish lunar-solar calendar. And Beit Shammai’s and Beit Hillel’s positions about how to light the Hanukkah candles—formulated, as we saw, in language that echoes the Adam story—mirrors Adam’s experience as well.

Instead of eight days of decreasing light followed by eight days of increasing light, which generate two consecutive festivals, as in the Adam story, Hanukkah is a single festival of eight days in which—within our textual tradition—the light of the candles simultaneously both decreases and increases. It is as if the Hanukkah passage folds the two parts of Adam’s experience over onto one another, asking us to experience the decreasing light and the increasing light at one and the same time. This complicates the experience of darkness, suggesting, perhaps, that not only will darkness inevitably give way to the light—as in the Adam story—but that darkness and light are interwoven in some way. Perhaps we are invited to imagine ways in which the experience of darkness itself might—at least from the perspective of another year—be a source of light.

Finally, the Adam story traces Adam’s maturation from having a consciousness of the world as an extension of himself to having a consciousness that is alienated from the world. At the story’s end, Adam believes that “this is the way of the world” and that his behavior and his state of being have no impact on the way the world functions. The story of Hanukkah asks us to reevaluate this vision of our place in the world. Like Adam, we live in a world that has an existence independent of ourselves. But Hanukkah asks us to light a candle, to add light to the world, not only, like Adam, to celebrate with praise and thanksgiving. The passage about Hanukkah, read in relation to the story about Adam, invites us to imagine how a human being who accepts the realization to which Adam comes can nevertheless believe in our ability to affect the world.

The dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai has always puzzled me. Yes, as I have suggested above, the two positions side-by-side offer a generative experience of overlapping increasing and diminishing light. But, as alternative positions about how to light the candles, Beit Hillel’s position, which is universally followed, seems eminently sensible, while Beit’s Shammai’s position seems almost unimaginable. Why would we think to have a candle-lighting practice that moves from eight candles down to one, a practice that has us celebrate Hanukkah by creating an experience of diminishing light?

Perhaps we can understand Beit Shammai’s position in light of the notion that Hanukkah moves us from a position of alienation from the world to a belief in the possibility of having an impact on the world. Beit Hillel’s position has us reflecting the light that is about to increase or modeling the increase that we anticipate we will soon experience. But Beit Shammai asks us to do something different. Beit Shammai asks us, in the very darkest time, when the last sliver of light is about to disappear, to bring a blast of light into the world. Our actions light up the world and, over time, as the world begins to brighten, it is necessary for us to put in less and less light. Beit Hillel, in other words, has us lighting the candles as a form of pirsumei nisa—publicizing the miracle—responding to the change from darkness to light by reflecting that change, increasing the light of the candles from night to night. In a sense, we are like Adam, responding to the change that we experience with praise and
thanksgiving. For Beit Shammai, however, we do not respond to the change. Instead, Beit Shammai asks us to create that change, to enter into the experience of being plunged into darkness and to give out all of the light that we can muster.

The echoing of the story of Adam and the Hanukkah passage opens dimensions of the experience of Hanukkah that go beyond the classical story that the Bavli explicitly relates. Within this intertextual space, Hanukkah becomes a time that allows us to mark the experience of darkness, the terror and uncertainty that each person faces at times when light, literally or figuratively, seems to be slipping away. It becomes a holiday in which we search for tiny points of light, which promises us that small sources of light can be found and that, no matter how dark it is, light will return to the world again. The eight days of Hanukkah, and the candle-lighting practices that the Talmud describes, evoke an overlap of decreasing and increasing light, offering an experience of darkness and light that are interwoven with each other, as they so often are even in our most difficult and our most joyful life events. And the mitzvah of candle lighting holds out the promise and responsibility that, even though, as children of Adam, we are very small, each one of us does have the capacity to bring some light into a world that can be very dark.

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From twenty-sided dreidels to pet menorah hats, the American Hanukkah marketplace has reached new and at times satirical heights. As a designer of Hanukkah products, I have always wondered how this marketplace came to be. During a recent bout of designer’s block, I decided to head back to the early 1900s to draw inspiration from the Hanukkah gifts of yore. As I scrolled through digitized Yiddish newspaper ads, I was given insight into the origins of this Americanized market.

It turns out that Yiddish ads in newspapers such as the Forward (Forverts) or the Yidishe Tageblatt captured more than the growth of Hanukkah in America—they provided a window into immigrants' first encounters with American culture. In her book Jewish Mad Men, Kerri P. Steinberg explains that “through its stories and advertisements, the Forward introduced first-generation immigrants to the American way” (p. 17). While these ads were intended for Hanukkah, they also provided explicit and implicit messages about how to keep up with their new American neighbors.

One of the earliest Hanukkah ads, a December 27, 1902, ad for tea and coffee on page six of the Forverts, was simply titled “Hanukkah Presents,” with the word “presents” spelled out phonetically in Yiddish. According to Steinberg, by spelling out English words in Yiddish, these ads “increased the vocabulary of the immigrant, assisting them in their acculturation exercises”
In promoting tea and coffee, this ad taught immigrants how they could become classier and more American. This ad ironically used Yiddish to help Americanize immigrants’ food habits.

Advertisers also used Yiddish to teach immigrants how to smell and feel like real Americans. A December 9, 1920 ad on page four of the Forverts ad featured soap, perfume, after-shave, talcum powder, and dental cream (later known as toothpaste) as gifts for Hanukkah. Steinberg explains that “such ads helped make readers aware of the necessity of cleanliness and good hygiene as they evolved into acquiescent Americans” (p. 18–19).

Food manufacturers also entered the Yiddish advertising fray. On December 12, 1917, The Hecker Cereal Company ran an ad on page three of the Yidishe Tageblatt for “pancake flour,” likely the predecessor of pancake mix, to make “Hanukkah latkes” (spelled out phonetically in Yiddish). Since latkes were typically cooked with schmaltz and potatoes, this ad tried to convince immigrants to switch over to a simpler American formula. When I asked her about this ad, the current Forverts editor Rukhl Schaechter explained its underlying message: “If the Jewish immigrants want to fit into America they might just make the switch to breakfast pancakes.”

As an ad from December 21, 1932, on page six of the Forverts put it, “Let your guests choose which Hanukkah games to play, but if you want it to be a success, make your cakes with Royal Baking powder.” Forget about candles and dreidels—it was American taste, literally and figuratively, that would make immigrants’ meals a success.

These Hanukkah ads presented immigrants not only with an opportunity but a choice: choose between your old-fashioned past and your new American identity. In her book Hanukkah in America: A History, Dianne Ashton explains that immigrants “could enact a range of identities either by selecting these new American products, by cooking with new American ingredients,” or by using recipes from the old country (p. 118). The irony of these Yiddish ads was that although they were written in the language of the Old Country, they viewed the ways of
the Old Country as a regression; using American products was seen as laudatory.

Conveniently for advertisers, immigrants treated Yiddish ads as extensions of their already trusted Yiddish periodicals. The copy of Yiddish ads and the images that accompanied them paradoxically used immigrants’ native tongue to transmit tips for how to rid themselves of their Old Country ways. The subliminal Yiddish message was clear: shed your immigrant fashions to make room for your new American identity.

While immigrants might have not recognized the power of Yiddish advertising, newspaper editors certainly did. Ashton explains how some editors voiced concerns about the intensity, for example, of the growing Hanukkah marketplace. Ashton states how as early as 1907, “perhaps contradicting the paper’s own advertising,” the newspaper Yidishe Tageblatt “warned readers, ‘we do not want death from pleasure!’” (p. 113).

Ultimately, however, the “market forces” of Yiddish advertising triumphed (Ashton 137). While perhaps counterproductive to the proliferation of Jewish traditions and observances, Yiddish advertisements succeeded in creating an Americanized generation of Jewish immigrants.

Yiddish Hanukkah ads did more than expand the Hanukkah marketplace; they used the mamaloshen to fastrack Jewish assimilation. These ads ironically contributed to a new miracle for Jewish immigrants in America—the ability to fully assimilate, with liberty and presents for all.

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