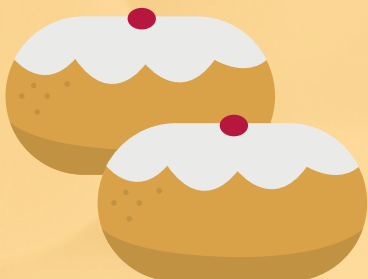




CHANUKAH and WELLBEING

Brought to you by the Honeycomb Project

The Honeycomb Project is a joint project between the Movement for Reform Judaism and Liberal Judaism, increasing care and wellbeing training and resources across both movements



The Honeycomb Project offers support to care volunteers and coordinators in Liberal and Reform communities. As we approach the darkest nights of the year, we asked eight Rabbis, Cantors and Student Rabbis from both Movements to offer texts on wellbeing, eight Chanukah lights that will hopefully bring reflection, warmth and joy.

This document was written for Chanukah 2022, with a new foreword by Rabbi Eryn London for 2023.

Chanukah sameach from the Honeycomb Project.

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**Thank you to all our
contributors**

Chanukah 2023

Rabbi Eryn London

In trying to write about Israel, Chanukah and wellbeing - honestly I am at a loss for words, and nothing really seems right.

I could go about writing about the little sparks of light in these very dark feeling moments – the small and major miracles that have happened, the immense amounts of people gathering together helping out in any way that is possible, the community building and outreach.

I could speak about how we are fighting our own battle today like the Maccabees. It is not just a fight against Hamas, but it is also the fight in many of our home cities to feel safe to say that we are Jewish. To be able to walk around proud of our religion, culture, heritage - that we find the time where our dreidel game is not to ‘fool’ someone into thinking we are doing something other than something Jewish.

But that feels too trite and does not recognize the pain, the anger, the sadness, the fear that people are feeling.

the pain, the anger, the sadness, the fear

There have been too many people who have been killed on both sides (one would have been too many, and we are at many more than that). The world has been shaken, and I think that many of us are trying to find the steady ground to stand on. Trying to find the place where we have space for our grief, fear, sadness, alongside the other parts of life that are still happening – the joy of birth, marriage, graduation, professional accomplishments, personal accomplishment. Now more than it has been in a while, many of us are holding conflicting emotions, unsure how to both be sad and happy at the same time.

If I try to imagine being a Maccabee or even a person living through the period, I think that they probably felt the same way. Their brothers, sisters, friends were fighting. It felt like the world as they knew it was ending and changing. Those who were not fighting were doing what they could at home - being caregivers, organizing support to families in need, figuring out the small ways that they too could make a difference, or at least try. And while all that was going on they too were experiencing birth, marriage, personal and professional accomplishments. It all was going hand in hand.

There is a children's song I grew up singing during Chanukah - Banu Choshech l'Garesh, 'We have come to drive away the darkness'. It is all about our power to fight the darkness in the world. I didn't realize until recently that there are two other verses. One that likens people to the dreidel, that we spin and fall, but are able to get back up again. And one that says that we will 'know to retell, to sing, to dance'.

It is a reminder that we do acknowledge the dark that we are feeling, but there is also hope. Hope in the knowledge that we will be able to get up again like the dreidel. And hope in the knowledge that there will be times to retell, sing, and dance.



Day 1

Rabbi Alexandra Wright

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue



In the days when I was a volunteer chaplain on the multi-faith chaplaincy team at the North London Hospice, I was privileged to visit people in both the in-patient ward and day centre.

Crossing the threshold into the hospice once a week, I would pause to prepare myself mentally and emotionally. Not everyone was in the last stages of their life, some were at the hospice for respite care – the continuing care that the hospice gives to individuals living with their illness. But, of course, there were many who were on their final journey, and it might be days or hours until they took their final breath.

One Chanukah, I took with me a Chanukiah and some candles. I think it must have been the days before lighting candles transgressed health and safety concerns. The nursing staff asked if I could pop into a room where there was a Jewish woman in some distress. She was agitated and although they had tried medication to calm her, it hadn't worked.

sensitivity, wisdom and kindness

I was often impressed when the medical director would call one of the clergy volunteers to visit a patient, for whom no amount of medical intervention would help and when there was a real investment in exploring spiritual distress. I was blessed to have learnt so much from the sensitivity, wisdom and kindness of all the staff at the North London Hospice. Sarah (not her real name) was lying on her pillows, desperately weak, frightened of what lay ahead, grief-stricken about leaving her family and those she loved so dearly.

We spoke for a little while and she expressed her sadness and fears. She spoke of the loss of her own, now dead, parents and how they seemed, once again, so close to her, as though they were in the next room.

I asked her whether she would like to light the Chanukah candles and she said that she would. I took the chanukkiyah out of my bag and put it on her table. I inserted the candles into the holders and lit the shammash. Then gently, I recited the blessings. She was too weak and too shaky to light the candles, so I lit them for her and invited her to dedicate each candle to someone dear and special in her life.

love, gratitude and longing

With each flame lit, she spoke about those whom she loved – her parents, her partner and children, friends – her words emerged like a prayer, as though she was pouring out her heart with love, gratitude and longing. All the things she would miss and all the things that filled her heart with a profound sense of having been blessed in her life.

sadness and loss, fulfilment and gratitude

I listened in silence. That moment has stayed with me until now. Not the words, I have forgotten them, but that sense that we can reach the last days or weeks of our lives, with both sadness and loss, but also with fulfilment and gratitude for all that has gone before.

Day 2

Student Rabbi Eleanor Davis

Leo Baeck College



It can be easy to feel a little down at this time of year, when the hours of darkness greatly outnumber the hours of daylight. Office hours end after night has fallen, so for many women the simple act of travelling home involves extra concern about personal safety; at the other end of the day, winter often means getting out of bed in the dark and setting off before full daylight.

spreading light and warmth, lifting my spirits

Amid all this, Chanukah enters and creates an opportunity to kindle fire during the darkest nights of the year, spreading light and warmth and lifting my spirits. Whether I'm using oil lamps or candles, the growing radiance is beautiful in itself and also seems to symbolise a promise that light will increase again; these cold, dark nights will not last forever. I always try not to light my Chanukiah with other lights too close nearby, because I especially like to watch the flames burn down to the very end: in the darkness, even the small flickering flames of the last remnants of the wicks are visible.

Because Chanukah always contains Rosh Chodesh Tevet, the moonless deepest point of winter's darkness, it often reminds me of the Talmudic midrash (Chullin 60b) about the creation of the two great lights. Between God telling the moon to make herself smaller and ultimately instituting Rosh Chodesh as compensation, God initially tries to placate the moon by suggesting that she should shine by day and night, alongside the sun. Unappeased, the moon asks, "What use is a lamp at noon?"

It's a perceptive question: the moon understood that some lights can be invisible, or at least unappreciated, until they appear amid darkness. Marking Rosh Chodesh Tevet during Chanukah reminds me not only that we can light lamps in the darkness, but also that it is precisely in the darkest nights that even the tiniest light becomes visible. It can be a welcome boost to realise that it is sometimes the darkest nights of my soul that help me to notice and appreciate the small blessings around me.

notice and appreciate

Rosh Chodesh Tevet also brings the comfort that darkness is not something to be banished once and for all: rather it is something that will come around at intervals, whether or not we wish it. Winter festivals offer us much-needed light amid the darkness but paradoxically, it's often the darkness itself that makes the light remarkable. Perhaps this year we can ask ourselves as we kindle our Chanukiyot: are we lighting up the darkness, or is the darkness enabling us to see the light?

Day 3

Rabbi Gili Zidkiyahu

Nottingham Liberal Synagogue



לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך אמר אוי לי שמא בשביל שסרחתי
עולם חשוך בעדי וחוזר לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים עמד
וישב ח' ימים בתענית [ובתפלה]

When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively
diminishing,

he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming
dark around me and will ultimately return to chaos and disorder.

And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven.

He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer.

כיון שראה תקופת טבת וראה יום שמאריך והולך אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא הלך
ועשה שמונה ימים טובים לשנה האחרת עשן לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים

Once he saw that the season of Tevet, and saw that the day was
progressively lengthening, he said: this is the order of the world. He
went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he
observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the
previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of
festivities.

Talmud Bavli, Avoda Zara 8a

every festival is like an archaeological site

In our tradition every festival is like an archeological site, with layer
upon layer of rituals, texts, values and stories. There is always more
than one source, more than one explanation, more than one
understanding. Ancient agricultural rituals, Torah, stories and history
play together.

Chanukah, as rich as any other, tells a story of heroism and miracles. It is also an oil festival in the season of olive oil pressing in the land of Israel, and of course it is a festival of light in a time of darkness.

From all the sources we have about Chanukah – the one from Avoda Zara is my favourite. It tells the story of the pre-national pre-monotheist pre-Abrahamic human: Adam. A person with a naïve understanding, in a child-like stage, trying to make sense of the world.

This human is no stranger to us, bursting with emotion, closely connected to the world outside, open to impressions. This human is within us! Our intellect, sophistication and knowledge of the world sometime let us forget, but it is us, affected by darkness and light, by cold and warmth, seeking answers within the great mystery.

Like Adam we encounter fear and distress, well, not only about the weather or the lack of daylight, but from other anxieties too.

In this Talmudic story I can see five forces guiding us through fear and dark feelings:

Acknowledgment: naming our fears, touching them with our thoughts and without words, allowing them to have a place.

Prayer: creating room for hope, creating a vision of what you are hoping for, calling out for the power – not only that of God, but for your own powers and to that of fellow humans.

Mindfulness: to the light changes, to the constant movement, to cycles...

Understanding: using your experience and the experience of others to figure things out. It can be understanding and getting information about the object of your concerns, or it can be figuring out what helps you rebuild your inner strength.

Celebration: making your time meaningful and remembered, again, marking both the uniqueness of each day and each human, and the patterns, cycles and similarities.

I want to reconnect to this fear and devastation, to be affected deeply by darkness, and then reawakened, reassured, by the growing of the light.

Day 4

Cantor Zoe Jacobs

Finchley Reform Synagogue

This time of year brings mixed feelings: for some of us, the chance to wrap up warm and see the lights of the season brings joy, while for others, the diminishing light hours in the day make day-to-day life more challenging. I suspect many of us have moments of both these feelings. And so we seek ways to bring joy into the darkness in any way we can.

Music truly can shift how we feel. A good song can bring joy and even hold memories, connecting us to a time of year or life.

Perhaps this highlights the wisdom of our ancestors, who decided that the text of Mi Chamocha in our liturgy should adapt to take on a different, fitting melody in the lead up to each of the festivals in the Jewish calendar.

I don't know whether supermarket officials borrowed this idea of 'preparation through music', but we are used to supermarkets in the secular world playing Christmas songs anytime after the High Holy Days through to the end of the secular year!

bringing with it feelings of wellbeing and harmony

Inevitably, some of us enjoy and appreciate this, (noticing, perhaps, just how many Christmas songs were written by Jewish composers!) while others find we tire of it quickly. For so many religions and communities, singing is a key part of this season - and we know that singing helps regulate our breathing, filling our bodies with oxygen, and bringing with it feelings of wellbeing and harmony.

So if you're looking for music to sing along to, or to learn and share with others, perhaps you'll find joy in one of these fun Chanukah playlists?

You might just find that listening to songs about latkes, candles, and Chanukah celebrations will help get you in the mood for this season of dedication. May we each find a way to celebrate that helps us to find exactly the light in the darkness we seek.

Chanukah Playlists on Spotify:

This [Spotify playlist](#) was made by the FRS clergy for all ages

And here you can find two playlists made by the Union for Reform Judaism in America - the second is particularly aimed at families with young children:

[URJ Hanukah Songs](#)

[URJ Hanukah Family Favourites](#)



Day 5

Michael Hilton

Rabbi Emeritus

Kol Chai Hatch End Reform Jewish Community



Our Rabbis taught: When Adam saw the days getting gradually shorter, he said, ‘Woe is me, the world around me is getting dark and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!’ So he began keeping an eight days’ fast. But then he noticed the winter solstice and the days gradually getting longer, so he said, ‘This is the way of the world’, and he decided to keep an eight days’ festivity.

(Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a).

expel the gloom, to push away the darkness

It is all too easy to feel gloomy at the darkest time of year. That’s why, throughout the history of civilization in northern lands, the darkest time has been a time of feasting and celebration – it’s an attempt to expel the gloom, to push away the darkness. But the bigger the parties, the more easy it is to feel left out if you are alone or lonely or feeling low. The more society promises us, the more the choices, the more hype in the adverts, the more depressed and anxious we feel, fearful that everyone out there is having a better time than we are.

Sometimes, lighting a Chanukah candle and nibbling a latke can give us more of a sense of well being than the largest of winter feasts.

Why is that? I think it's because the candles connect us. They connect us to each other, to a message of hope in dark times. We're not going to rededicate a temple like the Maccabees, but we can rededicate ourselves to trying to be part of a community. It's a time when many in the Jewish community volunteer in hospitals or at food banks or in other ways. Sometimes, giving to others can help to free us from dwelling so much on our own problems, or the seeming prison of our own four walls.

message of hope in dark times

The word Chanukah reminds us of the victory of the Maccabees. They succeeded in their aims and to this day we celebrate their victory, which really did deliver the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few.

But our rabbis had a very different answer. They couldn't fight back. Their Temple and their soldiers had gone and they only had their synagogues and their words. Their answer was to light candles, not to take up arms. King Canute discovered that you cannot turn back the waves, but Jews would point out that you can build a boat. We cannot escape the darkness, but we can light a candle. In Israel more and more people are calling this festival Chag Urim (Festival of Lights) instead of Chanukah. It's a name that reminds us to light one more candle each day, hoping for the returning light at the season of darkness. At a time when there is so much to worry about in our world, our Festival of Lights brings a message of hope.

Chag Urim Sameach

Day 6

Rabbi Sandra Kviat

Crouch End Liberal Chavurah



What does it mean to have enough? Is it one more chocolate from the box? Or that new jumper you really want? Or the number of likes to a post? Do you feel enoughness when the whole family is gathered and food, presents and drink is flowing? Do you feel it right now?

Perhaps we should turn the question around and say - when do you feel a want or a need? When do you not have enough? All the time or just sometimes?

This is a question that is heightened at this time of the year, but really we face it all year round. One answer comes from Torah, rather than the Chanukah story. After many years apart, Jacob and Esau meet again, and after they have embraced and wept, Jacob greets Esau with gifts. Esau's response? "yesh li rav". I have enough.

Esau's words are striking in their simplicity and comfort. He is a changed man. He has enough, he is enough. But that 'enoughness' is not something that we necessarily feel, especially at this time of the year.

I have enough. I am enough

The researcher and wise woman Brene Brown explains:

"We live in a culture of never enough. You can fill in the blanks; never good enough, skinny enough, rich enough, popular enough, never bestseller enough, [never blah blah enough], never enough twitter followers, never enough, never enough, never enough. What I found...

there's only one way out of scarcity and that is enoughness. I always thought before I did this research that the opposite of scarcity was abundance but I'm beginning to think those are two sides of the same coin. At some point we need to just say enough, I'm enough, what I'm doing is enough..."

I think most of us can recognise this feeling of being subtly and not so subtly told that we need something. That we lack something, and if we only buy this [thing], if we only get more of that, then we will feel happy/joyful/content. This rarely happens, and the feeling of never enough makes us want more.

Brene Brown reminds us that it is not only about having enough but fundamentally about being enough. Being enough in ourselves.

The way out of 'never enough' she advises, is something we recognise from Jewish tradition, it's about practising gratitude. Naming and focusing on being grateful for the bigger and smaller things in life shifts our focus from the quantity of stuff that we want or feel is missing, and helps us realise what we do have and be grateful for it.

In the case of Esau, he didn't need presents, blessings or his birthright back (if that would even have been possible). He did not need to measure his worth relative to Jacob's. He seems to have become grateful for what he had, without having to compare it to Jacob. He might have realised that it is not about what you get or what you have, but being grateful. Yesh li rav - I have enough.

I think most of us understand this, some practise gratitude daily, at dinner tables, when out for a walk, maybe in a gratitude journal. What matters is the continued practice, spending a moment each day finding and voicing one specific thing, person, or event that has made us grateful. 'Today I am grateful for....', you then fill in the blanks.

Today I am grateful for....

You might have wondered about the culture of 'never enough' and have challenged it, maybe even successfully. But as Chanukkah approaches it is easy to fall into the trap of wanting to show our love through multiple lavish gifts and food. I'm not advocating not giving or sharing, but rather to think about as we give; 'what is enough?' What is enough for you as a giver, what is enough for you as a receiver. And how do we create a sense of gratitude rather than want? So that we can say like Esau, 'yesh li rav', I have enough in my life, I am enough in my life.

Day 7

Rabbi Igor Zinkov

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue

Where is Home?



Mary Howe is a contemporary American poet. Inspired by Stephen Hawking's theory of Singularity, she wrote a poem I would like to share with you today. According to this theory, Hawking argued that the universe began as a small, infinitely dense point called a singularity. Everything we know today was once a single point that expanded into existence after the Big Bang. Considering this theory, Howe tried to imagine what it meant for human existence and wrote this poem.

Singularity by Marie Howe (after Stephen Hawking)

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the
singularity
we once were?

so compact nobody
needed a bed, or food or money—

nobody hiding in the school bathroom
or home alone

pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.

*For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?*

There was no *Nature*. No
them. No tests
to determine if the elephant
grieves her calf or if

the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;

would that we could wake up to what we were
—when we *were* ocean and before that
to when sky was earth, and animal was energy,
and rock was
liquid and stars were space and space was not

at all—nothing

before we came to believe humans were so
important
before this awful loneliness.

Can molecules recall it?
what once was? before anything happened?

No I, no We, no one. No was
No verb no noun
only a tiny tiny dot brimming with

is is is is is
All everything home

Howe's premise is beautifully simple and very creative. When everything is located at a single point, this point becomes home. I found this idea very moving. However far you look around you, everything has the same beginning. Therefore, everything is your home.

It is this concept of home that intrigues and fascinates me. Where is home? Why is home so crucial for our well-being? What can we do to help ourselves and others to have a place called home?

Sometimes the world seems so big and scary that many naturally prefer to stay in a familiar and secure place. Perhaps, this was the reason for changing Judaism from a Temple-based religion to synagogue and home-based.

Jews used to have the Temple, and Jewish spiritual life took place there. Since the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of Jewish people around the world, home-based practices started to develop. Perhaps, Chanukkah is the most important of home-based festivals in Judaism.

everywhere should feel like home

The main Chanukah ritual is lighting candles. The modern tradition is to light candles and put a chanukiya on a window so it can be seen from the outside. By doing so, in addition to making our homes more beautiful, brighter, and cosier, we also communicate with the outside world. Talmudic Rabbis say that it is for the sake of publicising the miracle. I think the message is deeper than that. By making Chanukah candles visible from the outside, we symbolise that everywhere should feel like home, everywhere should become a warm, bright and cosy space, and everywhere should be beautiful, familiar and secure.

May this Chanukah become a warm and safe space for all of us, may our homes always be cosy and safe, and may we do all we can to extend the home-like feeling as far beyond our homes as we can.

Day 8

Rabbi Eryn London

The Honeycomb Project

Have you ever had to advocate for yourself?

How did you feel doing that?

What gave you the courage to do so?



'May you be like Judith'

I find that advocating for myself is one of the most difficult things to do, even though I believe strongly that I have a voice and it should be heard, and I deserve the help that I need. I am the one who regularly tells others that they should have the confidence and strength to do so, because 'obviously' they should not be suffering.

But it is hard. It is hard to turn back to someone who said no to you. It is hard when you are in distress and just trying to get help, because the conversations, phone calls, emails, searches take energy that you might not have. It is hard because there is a chance that you will be told no again, which might make it feel like it is all in your head or there really isn't anything to do but be in the state of distress. It is hard because maybe if I am asking 'too many times' or 'too much' they might think I am a nuisance or pain - even when all I want is help.

The woman who would not just sit back and watch

When I think about self-advocacy and Chanukah, I first think of the story of Judith - the woman who would not just sit back and watch. She stood up to many people. She brought herself forward to Uzziah, the leader of the city telling him that the idea of either starving or being handed over to the enemy was no way to live life. And even though he and others in the city thought she was foolish, she took matters into her own hands. She would not let herself or her people sit back and suffer. It was hard work convincing Uzziah to leave the city. Harder work to convince the Greek guards to let her and her maidservant speak to Holofernes. And even harder work to get him to trust her. And perhaps the hardest, was taking his life in her own hands - even though that act would save her life and the lives of all who lived in her city.

It is a story of perseverance and creativity (although the end is quite gruesome). What we need might not be the most obvious solution. The people who we are meant to be receiving help from, might not always be the most helpful without a bit of pushing. The path might feel scary, overwhelming or even tortuous. But as we learn in Perkei Avot, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?'

This Chanukah, may we all be blessed to be like Judith, having someone who will stand by outside as we do this hard work, having the strength to speak up for ourselves when we need to; not giving up until we get what we need.



Find out more about the Honeycomb Project on our websites:

[The Movement for Reform Judaism](#)
[Liberal Judaism](#)

Chanukah Sameach