

Miracles

A RESOURCE FOR CHANUKAH

An invitation to learn

Gathering with friends and family to kindle the lights of the Chanukah is one of the earliest traditions that a Jew learns. Just as the abundant lights increase night by night, so too do opportunities for illuminating Jewish learning. The model of Chavruta – exploring Jewish texts with a partner or a group – creates a space for reflection, growth, participation, diversity and tolerance. Through this resource we hope to bring together the illumination of Chanukah and the model of Chavruta to supplement your festive event.

These pages contain eight sources which address the theme of 'Miracles' – exploring the relationship between the inexplicable and the inevitable, God and humanity, and the phenomena of modern-day miracles. Each source consists of a text, plus some discussion questions to get the conversation flowing. We have also included reflections upon beginning and ending your learning.

It is not necessary to explore every text, nor to answer every question. You may wish to study with a partner or in a group (or both) and the session may last for eight minutes or for eight whole days... the decisions are yours! However you choose to learn or teach the material, we hope that you will find it both stimulating and illuminating.

chavruta@limmud.org

Reflections upon learning with a partner

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְחֵם
שְׂכָר טוֹב בְּעַמְלָם

קהלת ד:ט

Two are better than one,
because they have
a greater reward
for their toil

Ecclesiastes 4:9

בְּרִזָּל בְּבִרְזָל יֶחֱד
וְאִישׁ יֶחֱד פְּנִירְעָהוּ

משלי כז:ז

As iron sharpens iron,
so too one person
sharpens the wits
of their friend

Proverbs 27:17

THE MIRACLE OF LIGHT

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b

What is Chanukah? The Rabbis taught: from the twenty-fifth of Kislev are eight days of Chanukah, on which one may not eulogise and may not fast, since when the Greeks entered the sanctuary they defiled all of the oil in the sanctuary. When the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them, they searched and found only one jar of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, but it had only enough to light [the menorah] for one day. A miracle was performed and they lit [the menorah] from it for eight days. The next year, they set [those days] and made them holidays with *hallel* and thanksgiving.

תלמוד בבלי, שבת כא ע"ב

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שפשגנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פד אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד. נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

Points to consider

Why do you think that the Sages prefer to explain Chanukah as the celebration of a miracle rather than of a military victory?

This passage – the earliest description of the miracle of Chanukah – does not mention God. Do you imagine God as being hidden or revealed during the story?

THE MIRACLE OF HEALING

A Second Chance at Life, Thanks to Hadassah's Heart Institute

A resident of a rural settlement called Dishon, established by Libyan Jewish immigrants in 1953, Eyal Amar, age 47, was rather young to suffer a devastating heart attack. Nevertheless, he did, but thanks to the courage and skill of the specialists at the Hadassah Medical Organization's Heart Institute and their complex protocol to redesign his heavily damaged heart, Eyal is able to walk and breathe again. "This might sound trivial," he says, "but believe me, for me, each breath is a miracle. I am so grateful for this gift of a second chance at life." ... Today, Mr. Amar's prognosis is excellent. He and his loved ones are all counting their blessings, planning for a future that seemed not to exist just a short time ago.

hadassah.org, 2 January 2017

Points to consider

Is medical progress always a modern miracle? Is it ever playing God?

How would you live your life differently if you felt that "each breath is a miracle"?

THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

Genesis Rabbah 68:4

[Rabbi Yose] said to [a Roman matron]: The Holy Blessed One sits and pairs partners, the daughter of this one to this one, the wife of that one to that one. She said to him: This is God's craft? Even I could do that! I have many male servants and many female servants. In a short time, I could pair them. He said to her: If this appears easy to you, it appears as difficult to the Holy Blessed One as parting the Red Sea! ... What did she do? She took a thousand male servants and a thousand female servants and stood them in lines, and said: this one goes to that one, and that one goes to this one, and she paired them in one night. The next day, they reported to her: one had their head bashed in, one had their eye gouged, one had a broken leg. She said to them: What happened? This one said: I don't want that one. That one said: I don't want this one. Immediately she summoned Rabbi Yose bar Halafta, and said to him: Your God is not like the other gods; your Torah is true, pleasant, and exalted; you spoke wisely.

בראשית רבה סח:ד

אמר לה: הקדוש ברוך הוא יושב ומזוג וזוגים, בתו של פלוני לפלוני, אשתו של פלוני לפלוני, ממונו של פלוני לפלוני. אמרה ליה: ודא הוא אמנותיה? אף אני יכולה לעשות כן! כמה עבדים כמה שפחות יש לי, לשעה קלה אני יכולה לזוגן. אמר לה: אם קלה היא בעיניך, קשה היא לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא בקריעת ים סוף. ... מה עשתה? נטלה אלה עבדים ואלף שפחות והעמידה אותן שורות שורות, אמרה: פלן יסב לפלונית ופלונית תסב לפלוני, וזוגה אותן בלילה אחת. למחר, אתון לגבה דין מוחיה פציעא, דין עינו שמיטא, דין רגליה תבירא. אמרה להון: מה לבון? דא אמרה: לית אנא בעי לדין, ודין אמר: לית אנא בעי לדא. מיד שלחה והביאה את רבי יוסי בר חלפתא, אמרה לו: לית אלוה פאלהבון אמת היא תורתכון נאה ומשבחת, יפה אמרת!

Points to consider

Do you think that finding one's life partner is a miracle? Why or why not?

Is making matches truly as difficult as splitting the Red Sea?

THE MIRACLE OF A HOMETLAND

On This Day in 1991, IDF Makes a Miracle with 'Operation Solomon'

On this day in 1991, Israeli Defense Forces accomplished a miracle and broke a world record for number of passengers transported in a plane, launching a covert mission to airlift thousands of people... It seemed impossible at the time, but Operation Solomon rescued 14,500 Ethiopian Jews on May 24 and May 25 and transported them 2,500 miles to a new life in Israel. To date, the unprecedented airlift remains the largest aerial expedition in the history of the State of Israel and the largest transport of passengers in a single plane in the world.

Hana Levi Julian, jewishpress.com, 24 May 2016

Points to consider

What do you think was miraculous about Operation Solomon?

Today there are over 130,000 Israeli citizens of Ethiopian descent, including leaders in almost every profession. Do you consider this to be a miracle too?

THE MIRACLE OF PERSPECTIVE

Genesis 1:3

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Translation: JPS, 1999

The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility ...
The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.

Albert Einstein, "Physics and Reality", 1936

Lamentations 3:37

Whose decree was ever fulfilled, unless the Lord willed it?

Translation: JPS, 1999

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is."

Commonly attributed to Albert Einstein

בראשית א:ג

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר:

איכה ג:לז

מִי זֶה אָמַר וַתְּהִי אֲדֹנָי לֹא צְוָה:

Points to consider

Is miracle a matter of perspective?
Or is the possibility of perspective itself a miracle?

What would it look like to live your life as if everything were a miracle?

THE MIRACLE OF PEACE

The Miracle

Every drop of rain that falls in Sahara Desert says it all – it's a miracle.

All God's creations great and small, the Golden Gate and the Taj Mahal
– that's a miracle.

Test tube babies being born, mothers, fathers dead and gone – it's a miracle.

We're having a miracle on earth, mother nature does it all for us.

The wonders of this world go on, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon,

Captain Cook and Cain and Abel, Jimi Hendrix to the Tower of Babel –

It's a miracle, it's a miracle, it's a miracle, it's a miracle.

The one thing we're all waiting for, is peace on earth – an end to war.

It's a miracle we need – the miracle...

The miracle we're all waiting for today.

If every leaf on every tree, could tell a story that would be a miracle.

If every child on every street, had clothes to wear and food to eat
– that's a miracle.

If all God's people could be free, to live in perfect harmony
– it's a miracle.

We're having a miracle on earth, mother nature does it all for us.

Open hearts and surgery, Sunday mornings with a cup of tea;

Super powers always fighting, Mona Lisa just keeps on smiling;

It's a miracle, it's a miracle, it's a miracle, it's a miracle.

Queen, 1989

Points to consider

Which of these things do you think of as miracles?

If peace on earth is "the miracle", does that make it more or less attainable?

PRAYING FOR MIRACLES

Jewish Views on Miracles

In the Bible, the Talmud, and all other ancient and medieval Jewish writings it is taken for granted that miracles can and do occur, although a miracle was not thought of as a suspension of natural law since, before the rise of modern science, there was no such concept as a natural law that required to be suspended. [...] The Mishnah (Berakhot 9:3) defines as a 'vain prayer' a cry to God to undo the past. Two illustrations are given. One is where a man's wife is pregnant, and he prays that the child she is carrying should be a boy. ... God can perform a miracle and change the sex of the fetus from female to male but that, as the Gemara states in its comment to the Mishnah, is to pray for a miracle to be performed and no man has the right to assume that he is worthy for God to perform a miracle on his behalf.

Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*

Points to consider

How does this traditional Jewish understanding of miracles compare to your own?
Should we be allowed to pray for miracles? Why or why not?

PRAISING FOR MIRACLES

Grace After Meals on Chanukah

[We thank You also] for the miracles, the redemption, the mighty deeds, and the victories in battle which You performed for our ancestors in those days, at this time.

Translation: Koren Siddur

ברכת המזון, בחנוכה

עַל הַנְּסִים וְעַל הַפְּרָקָן וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַנְּפִלְאוֹת וְעַל
הַנְּחִמּוֹת שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

Points to consider

Is divine intervention always a miracle? What is the difference between miracles, redemption, mighty deeds, and victories in battle?

Why do we remind ourselves "at this time" of miracles which occurred "in those days"?

Closing reflection

Ben Bag-Bag said: בֵּן בַּג־בַּג אָמַר:
Turn it and turn it הִפְּךָ בָּהּ וְהִפְּךָ בָּהּ
for everything is in it דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ
reflect on it וְבָהּ תִּחְזִי
grow old and grey in it וְסִיב וּבִלָּה בָּהּ

Pirkei Avot 5:22 משנה אבות ה:כב

Limmud is an international
community of Jewish learning
founded in the UK in 1980.

Almost every week, there will be a Limmud activity or event somewhere in the world. These are organised by independent grassroots groups following shared values which include choice, diversity and volunteerism. Groups, volunteers, participants, presenters and supporters connect through the Limmud experience and by collaborations such as this Chanukah resource.

This material was collected by volunteers from Limmud North America: EJ Cohen, Karen Radkowsky, Mark Clamen, led by Ellen Flax. Edited by Mikhael Reuven. Designed by Uri Berkowitz.

Chanukah 2017 / 5778



Limmud promises that wherever you find yourself, Limmud can take you one step further on your Jewish journey.

Find out for yourself and get involved at limmud.org

Limmud, 1a Hall Street, London N12 8DB office@limmud.org

© Limmud 2017 Registered charity no.1083414