

Eight Tales For Eight Nights: Chanukah Is A Time For Telling Tales

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Whenever someone says “Chanukah,” a kaleidoscopic set of images and memories flash through my mind – flickering colors of candles, a family menorah, lights, miracles, my mother’s latkes, a dreidel, Chanukah gelt, the Maccabees, Hannah, Judith, an elder gentleman named Mr. Gordon handing out shiny pennies – and, of course, stories and songs in honor of this festival.

The festival of Chanukah, which begins on the 25th day of Kislev, records the first struggle for religious freedom in human history that was met with success in the year 165 B.C.E. The Maccabees fought bravely to keep the Jews from forsaking their religion for hellenism. It was not so much a fight against the physical destruction of Jews as was the case against Haman on Purim. However, Purim and Chanukah both represent struggles against enemies who wanted to perpetuate anti-Semitism by trying to crush the Jews physically and spiritually. The stories of heroism and bravery against all odds are told and retold from generation to generation as part of an oral tradition. When these stories become part of the culture, they are written down and read and celebrated each year. Coupled with the miracle of the one recovered flask of oil to rededicate the Temple, the story of Chanukah is celebrated through rituals of lighting the menorah, telling stories and singing songs, and reciting prayers of thanksgiving – in addition to playing games of chance, often where the answer must be 44 (the total number of candles lit during the eight days of Chanukah). The most popular game is playing dreidel where the four Hebrew letters, one on each of the four sides of the dreidel, stand for “*nes gadol hayah sham*” (“A great miracle happened there”). Of course, since 1948, the Israeli dreidel has the letter ‘*peh*’ instead of ‘*shin*’ to mean “A great miracle happened here.”

Each of the eight nights of Chanukah opens up opportunities to tell stories. Naturally, the main story should be the story of Chanukah and what happened there/here so as to listen to how the small band of Jews could overtake a well-equipped army to win the fight. As it says in the Haftarah for the first Shabbat of Chanukah: “... Not by might, not by power, but by My spirit – said the Lord of Hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

However, in addition to the story of the festival itself, these eight nights are a time for families and friends to tell folktales connected to the themes of the holiday - including those of the Master of Miracles, Elijah the Prophet. Since Elijah is the most popular hero in Jewish folklore, stories of his miracles and bringing hope can be found in many volumes, including *Tales of Elijah the Prophet*, Retold by Peninnah Schram. At the end of this article, I have added a bibliography of stories and anthologies containing primarily folktales for this holiday. Search and select stories that you enjoy that expand the themes and beauty of Chanukah – or perhaps tell stories you recall from earlier days.

In addition to folktales, this is a perfect time to tell personal and family stories related to the holiday. There are several ways to recall and/or create the narratives of your own personal/family stories. However, as an example, I would like to share one of my personal/family Chanukah stories that I have titled “The Substitute Shammass.” This story is true and it also really happened.

On the first night of Chanukah my father would proudly and carefully take his menorah from the breakfront, place it on the table and set the first candle in the right-hand holder. After my parents and I recited the blessings and lit the first candle, my father then would set the lit shammass in its special holder, higher than the other holders.

When I got old enough to observe the details, I realized that the shammass holder was of a different shape and design than the rest of the holders. Rather than a squat cup, it was oblong in shape and it swung from side to side held with a crooked S-shaped wire. One year I asked, “Pa, why is the shammass holder so different from the other candle holders?” My father laughed and responded, “Well, the original shammass cup had broken off years ago and I replaced it with an empty bullet shell. Then I used a curtain hook to attach it to the menorah.” I accepted that explanation and thought how ingenious my father was.

I loved that menorah and always watched the candles until they flickered out. My father had brought it with him when he came to America from Lithuania at the turn of the twentieth century (in 1906). At the time of these memories, the menorah was probably a half century old. It was a heavy metal menorah with eight metal cups to be filled with oil for lighting. I recall there had been tiny covers for each cup (but they had gotten lost along the years). The high metal back was impressive: two columns with vines wrapped around them on each side topped with metal flames. On the very top, in the center, was a 3-dimensional crown. In the middle of the back plate were two lions on either side of a seven-branched menorah, each lion holding onto it with one paw, and each looking up at it. To me it seemed like a theatrical backdrop for the drama of the little flames. Oh, yes. At the top of the right-hand column, but just below the metal flame, was placed the shammass cup, which was now replaced by that long, deeper oblong metal piece and attached to the menorah with a bent piece of wire.

While we would watch the candles ‘dance’, my father always told me the story of Chanukah. When all the candles had gone out, then we would go to the synagogue, where my father was the Hazzan, to celebrate the holiday with the congregation. The women of the Ladies Auxiliary of the shul were all busy frying hundreds of latkes in the big kitchen

and serving them to the families sitting at long tables. There was some kind of entertainment by the children of the Talmud Torah as well as my father singing Cantorial and Yiddish songs in honor of Chanukah.

But what I waited for each year was when a man by the name of Mr. Harry Gordon would take his seat behind a certain small table, with shiny pennies piled up in front of him. The children all lined up in front of the table. He would greet each child by name and ask, "How old are you this year?" And then he would give each of us Chanukah gelt according to our age – 5 years old, five pennies; 10 years old, ten pennies, and so on. I treasure that gift as I treasure this memory.

One Chanukah, when I was a college student, I wondered about the substitute shammas. After lighting candles with my parents, I suddenly said, "Pa, it's absolutely perfect that this bullet casing be on a menorah. After all, when the Maccabees found the Temple desecrated and the menorah destroyed, they used spears to hold the cruses of oil so that they could rededicate the Temple. Doesn't it say in Isaiah that peace will come when we beat our swords into ploughshares? Maybe we should add, 'And our bullets into menorahs!'"

I now have inherited this menorah, the menorah I love, so filled with memories and lights. And when I light the shammas each year for the eight nights of Chanukah, it is also the shammas holder that holds a special meaning for me.

This is the story my children grew up hearing from me and it is part of our family lore and their legacy.

Stored memories are the key to holiday stories. We all have plenty of story-producing memories, once we retrieve them, activate them, and then keep them active by telling our stories. This series of questions and exercises will help you find and retrieve the stories of your past Chanukahs (and other holidays). Use all five senses to recall places, people, objects, and experiences so that you will have personal and family stories to tell this Chanukah.

Places

Memories of a place brings with it memories of events. To retrieve the stories that happened in a particular location, we must mentally move back to that place and time. The setting acts as a hook that pulls the story from its hidden spaces. Stories are wound around the core of a place, and standing in the center allows you to look at the layer upon time-bound layer of events that occurred there. The following imaginative exercise will help put you back into the places of your past so that you can retrieve the stories living within them.

In your mind, recreate the first Chanukah you can recall – or a favorite Chanukah – and where it took place. Fill in every detail, including the menorah, where it stood while lit, who was present with you, what songs you sang, the gifts you received, what you wore, and so on.

People

Making characters come to life will bring success to your stories. Choose people in your life who were part of the Chanukah celebration and describe them, bringing them alive by including such

details as mannerisms, clothing, topics of conversation, posture, hobbies, place at the table, facial expressions, and favorite phrases, jokes, songs, and quotes, especially at Chanukah. When you describe people, use nouns as well as adjectives to convey the essence of the characters. What roles did they play? Who was the family storyteller? To flesh out your descriptions, interview other people about these individuals.

Objects

You can help uncover stories by remembering any object(s) that you especially treasure, such as a photograph, a religious item (e.g., a menorah) or clothing. Did you ever have your own menorah? How did you obtain it? Was it a gift? If so, from whom, or did you make it in school? Was it handed down from someone in the family? What was its significance for that person? What special gift was given to you at Chanukah that you treasure? What special or unusual gift did you give someone for Chanukah?

Smells

Marcel Proust, in his literary works, took advantage of the fact that the sense of smell often serves as a powerful springboard to memory. Some studies have concluded that smell is the most effective trigger of the most vivid memories. Think of smells that bring back memories of Chanukah: the aroma of baking challah, frying of latkes or fried dough (*soufganiyot*), the smell of the candles going out, and so on.

Experiences

What was the happiest time you can remember during a Chanukah? The funniest episode at a Chanukah family gathering? The most poignant moment? The best gift you ever gave or received for Chanukah? A special visit or visitor? These questions may trigger recall of some high points - but they might also remind you of those tinier moments that are just as important in shaping lives and relationships – and creating or retrieving holiday memories.

All of our stories – stories of the holiday, personal and family stories, traditional folktales - have enriched the lives of all people and created in us a need to continue the tradition of "planting" stories in the minds and hearts of our next generation. Taking a storytelling approach to celebrating a holiday makes our heritage and history more vital because it gives it context with a rich pudding of plot and character that illustrates the celebration. When a generation can 'experience' its ancestors' history and feelings, share their ideas and sorrows, the lessons of their lives will live on. The Torah associates wisdom with the heart, not with the mind. So we must direct our stories to the heart, where truth and wisdom can be found by those who care to listen. There is always a time for telling stories, and there is always a story to fit the time. Storytelling not only reflects but perpetuates life. L'chaim!

A Bibliography Of Stories And Books For Chanukah Telling

Compiled by Peninnah Schram

Adler, David. **The Kid's Catalog of Hanukkah.** Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004.

Goldin, Barbara Diamond. **While the Candles Burn: Eight Stories for Hanukkah.** Illustrated by Elaine Greenstein. NY: Viking, 1996

8 stories which include original and traditional tellings on Hanukkah themes. Tales range over many countries and centuries. An introduction to each story presents the source, themes, and customs of the holiday.

Goldin, Barbara Diamond. **Journeys with Elijah: Eight Tales of the Prophet.** Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. NY: Gulliver/Harcourt, Brace, 1999

8 tales featuring Elijah in his many disguises, bringing hope and performing miracles as he travels to many countries. Bibliography.

Goldin, Barbara Diamond. **Ten Holiday Jewish Children's Stories.** Illustrated by Jeffrey Allon. NY: Pitspopany Press, 2000

Each of the ten stories highlights various meanings of the holidays. "Lost in the Woods" is the story for Chanukah.

Jaffe, Nina. **The Uninvited Guest and Other Jewish Holiday Tales.** Illustrated by Elivia Savadier. NY: Scholastic, Inc., 1993

Traditional folktales, a literary tale, and midrashim adapted for 7 major Jewish holidays, and Shabbat, some in new settings, for younger readers. In addition, there is an introduction about the Jewish calendar, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Jaffe, Nina. **In the Month of Kislev: A Story for Hanukkah.** Illustrated by Louise August. NY: Viking, 1992.

Kimmel, Eric A. **The Spotted Pony: A Collection of Hanukkah Stories.** Illustrated by Leonard Everett Fisher. NY: Holiday House, 1992

8 adapted tales for families featuring fools of Chelm, rabbis, King Solomon, and that clever trickster, Herschel of Ostropol. Sources are given.

Kimmel, Eric A., ed. **A Hanukkah Treasury.** Illustrated by Emily Lisker. NY: Henry Holt, 1998
13 original and traditional folktales plus poems/songs for Hanukkah, including "The Legend of Judith."

Kimmel, Eric A. **The Jar of Fools: Eight Hanukkah Stories from Chelm.** Illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein. NY: Holiday House, 2000.

Krensky, Stephen. **Hanukkah at Valley Forge.** Illust. Greg Harlin. NY: Dutton, 2006.

Rush, Barbara. **The Jewish Year: Celebrating the Holidays.** NY: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2001.

This book offers more than 35 literary excerpts, ranging from folktales to modern writing, for 17 Jewish holidays, plus folk customs, religious laws, and color art reproductions. Many

storytellers are represented in this collection. The book includes two Chanukah tales: "A Chanukah Miracle" (folktale) and "The Fourth Candle" by Mara.

- Schram, Peninnah and Steven M. Rosman. **Eight Tales for Eight Nights: Stories for Chanukah.** Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1990
8 stories, in addition to the ancient legend, which reflect the holiday themes and traditions of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. There are appendixes of Chanukah music, notes on the story, and a chapter on retrieving family stories. Two family stories told by the authors are also included.
- Schram, Peninnah. **Tales of Elijah the Prophet.** Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1991
36 stories of Elijah the Prophet, the master of miracles, gathered from various sources and centuries - with a major introduction and endnotes and written in an oral style. The foreword is by folklorist Dov Noy.
- Schram, Peninnah. **The Chanukah Blessing.** Illustrated by Jeffrey Allon. NY: URJ Press, 2000.
This Elijah the Prophet story includes many folktale motifs with an original plot. Elijah visits a certain poor family because of their special menorah and brings the family blessings. A recipe for a "Latke-Kugel" is included.
- Schwartz, Cherie Karo. **My Lucky Dreidel: Hanukkah Stories, Songs, Poems, Crafts, Recipes and Fun for Kids.** NY: Smithmark, 1994.
- Schwartz, Howard, **The Day the Rabbi Disappeared: Jewish Holiday Tales of Magic.** Illustrated by Monique Passicot. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003
For each of the 12 holidays, there is a story featuring a magical feat by a wise rabbi for the benefit of the Jewish people. Sources given. The Chanukah story is "The Enchanted Menorah."
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis. **Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories.** Pictures by Maurice Sendak. NY: Harper & Row, 1966.
This book of seven stories includes four with Chanukah themes: "The Snow in Chelm," "Grandmother's Tale," "The Devil's Trick," and the title story "Zlateh the Goat."

Special Resource Book To Find Jewish Stories By Theme, Etc.

- Elswit, Sharon Barcan. **The Jewish Story Finder: A Guide to 668 Tales Listing Subjects and Sources, 2d ed.** Foreword by Peninnah Schram. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012.
This valuable resource is a guide to finding Jewish folktales to fit a theme or subject under eleven major categories, including The Torah, the Talmud and Their Study, Biblical Characters and Events, Trickster and Fools, and Tales for Festivals and Holidays. There are numerous tales that are summarized with variants given, along with complete citations and a list of connecting themes. Extensive bibliography, Story Title Index, and Subject Index. Print Edition and also Ebook.