



COURSE GUIDE

**CHANUKAH 5777:
REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS
SUSPICIOUSLY FAMILIAR?**

This guide corresponds to the series:
[The History of Hanukkah: Is It Just a Jewish Version of Other Winter Holidays?](#)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

What's This Course About?	ii
Course Goals	iii
Video Discussion Points, and Sample Course Assessments	1
Discussion Points	2
Sample Course Assessments	4
Additional Activity Suggestions and Video Outlines	5
Additional Activity Suggestions	6
Video Outline.....	7
Student Workbook	20

🌀WHAT'S THIS COURSE ABOUT?🌀

How does Chanukah compare to other solstice-like holidays?

What is the role of God in Chanukah?

How can we invite God into our story?

Chanukah introduces us to the concept of adding light to a dark time of the year, echoing other holidays such as Christmas and ancient pagan festivals. Yet, upon closer look, these other holidays are very different from Chanukah in their approach to that light and its connection to God.

This teacher's guide was written by Dr. Sarah Levy and accompanies Rabbi Fohrman's teaching using the concepts of backwards design and focusing on the goals of the course. Included in this guide are video discussion points, activities, and companion guides for each segment, which suggest points at which to pause the videos and engage with the students. The companion guides contain relevant texts and graphic organizers designed to help enhance student learning. Additional activities and video outlines can also be found within this guide and include other ideas for reinforcing the main points of the videos. As an added resource, the guide also contains review questions to check student understanding after each video, as well as a selection of sample assessments for the course that could either be used as a formal measure of student learning or an informal means of summarizing the course.

REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS SUSPICIOUSLY FAMILIAR?

COURSE GOALS

By the end of this course, focused upon exploring the roles of God and light in Chanukah, students will...

Grasp the following enduring understandings:

- Chanukah is a way of adding light to the world by inviting God into our story.
- We can spread the light through kindness, justice, and goodness.

Be able to address the following essential questions:

- What is God's role in Chanukah?
- How does Chanukah compare to other light-driven holidays?
- How can we invite God into our story?

Know:

- The Talmudic definition of Chanukah
- How Chanukah differs from the pagan festivals described
- What the Jewish experience was in the time leading up to Chanukah

Be able to:

- Compare Chanukah to the pagan festivals described
- Explain what Chanukah means
- Differentiate the Maccabees' response from that of Adam

**VIDEO DISCUSSION POINTS
AND
SAMPLE ASSESSMENTS**



WATCH REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS SUSPICIOUSLY FAMILIAR?



POINTS TO PAUSE



DISCUSSION TOPICS

▪ Before the Video		How do you know when Chanukah is approaching? What are the signs?
▪ 2:07		Is Chanukah the Jewish Christmas?
▪ 5:13		What's going on here?
▪ 7:41		What would you expect to be a good answer?
▪ 8:33		Why is not fasting or eulogizing so important?
▪ 15:00		What is the connection between the two rabbinic texts?
▪ 18:34		How does our Chanukah celebration connect to Adam's?
▪ 20:30		What could these connections mean?
▪ 21:53		What was Adam's fear?
▪ 23:10		What do darkness, water, and wind remind you of?
▪ 30:09		What are the differences between Adam's experience and that of the Maccabees?
▪ 31:34		What reason might there be for these differences?
▪ After the video		How can we invite God into our story?



FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

Rabbi Fohrman explores the role of God and light during the Maccabees' time and during Chanukah.

Thinking about our own lives...

When have you sensed God's presence leaving or had a fear that He might leave?

What did his lack of presence look/feel like?

How did you respond?

How can you add light to the world?

How can bringing justice, kindness, and goodness to the world be like a miracle?

How can you take action like the Maccabees?

How can you invite God back into the story?

CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING

Why can't Chanukah be the Jewish Christmas?

Who was Julian Morgenstern, and what did he claim?

What does "Chanukah" mean?

How is Chanukah defined in the Talmud?

What are Kalanda and Saturnura?

How does winter seem like the Creator leaving?

What was the Jewish experience like leading up to the time of Chanukah?

How is the Maccabees response to darkness different from that of Adam?

How does Chanukah compare to pagan solstice rituals?

SAMPLE COURSE ASSESSMENTS

Below are three different summative assessment options for this video. Students could be given a choice or all instructed towards one specific option. Each of the options addresses the goals of the unit, and it is suggested that the grading criteria be the same, regardless of the option selected. Suggested assessment criteria include:

- *Selected option is completed as assigned*
- *Videos, texts, and sources are integrated into the assignment*
- *Suggested questions and topics are addressed*
- *Proper grammar and spelling are used and the assignment is presented neatly*

Chanukah – Encyclopedia Entry

Create an encyclopedia entry for the holiday of Chanukah. Make sure to address the following questions:

- What does Chanukah celebrate?
- How is Chanukah different from other holidays that might be considered similar?
- What are the roles of light and God?

Building a Chanukiah

Design a Chanukiah that symbolizes what the holiday of Chanukah is really about. Make sure to consider the following questions:

- What is the role of God?
- How can we add symbolic light to the world?
- What does Chanukah really celebrate?

Chanukah – A Journal Entry

Create a journal entry, or series of entries, written from the perspective of a Maccabee. Make sure to address the following questions:

- What caused you to be afraid?
- How did you add light to the world?
- How did you invite God into the story?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS
AND
VIDEO OUTLINES**

🌀 ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS 🌀

Encourage students to take part in a service project to add light to the world.

Engage in a historical study of the time leading up to Chanukah to get a better sense of the lives of the Maccabees.

Watch the movie Pay It Forward and discuss any connecting themes between the movie and Chanukah.

◀ REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS SUSPICIOUSLY FAMILIAR? ▶

VIDEO OUTLINE

Chanukah introduces us to the concept of adding light to a dark time of the year, echoing other holidays such as Christmas and ancient pagan festivals. Yet, upon closer look, these other holidays are very different from Chanukah in their approach to that light and its connection to God.

- I. Chanukah is around the corner, and how do you know?
 - a. Well, if you live in Israel, the stores start selling the jelly donuts a month in advance.
 - b. But here in the States, as heretical as it might sound, you often first feel Chanukah in the air when you're at the mall, and there you see a familiar scene: The orange glow of the electronic menorah mingling with the flickering lights of the Christmas tree. The greeting cards in the Hallmark store proclaim "Happy Holidays!" with bland co-mingling of the winter holidays, with religion conveniently taken out of the mix.
 - c. And I think many of us fear that dreaded moment as you're doing your gift shopping and your child turns to you and asks: "Hey, Mom, Dad, is Chanukah the Jewish Christmas or something? I mean, we get presents, they get presents; we light candles, they have those lit up trees and our Christian neighbors even light candles in their windows every year. Is Chanukah just a Jewish Christmas?"
 - i. So you explain to your kid: "Of course not, little Jimmy. You see, Chanukah has nothing to do with that jolly red guy in a red suit over there. It's about a small band of Jews, the Maccabees, who rebelled against the Greeks. Not only did the Maccabees defeat their armies, but they recaptured Jerusalem and the Temple and they restored our ability to practice our religion."
 - ii. So, little Jimmy nods his head, but as you leave the mall with your bag of presents, you can't help thinking: "You know, Chanukah's a holiday about a group of Jews who refused to identify with the dominant, non-Jewish culture. Isn't it a little strange then that for us, right here in the parking lot, between Nordstrom and the Apple Store, our culture and theirs just seem to melt into each other?"
 - iii. So, you get into the car, and little Jimmy's question continues to echo in your ears: Is Chanukah the Jewish Christmas?
 1. Is it just a strange coincidence that these two holidays always seem to hang out together at this time of year?
 2. I mean, this year it's right in your face: The very first day of Chanukah actually falls out on December 25th. What's going on here? You shake your head and you drive away.
- II. Good News, Bad News
 - a. Okay, so I have some good news for you and some bad news.
 - i. Good news first.
 1. Chanukah is definitely not the Jewish Christmas – it can't be.
 2. Chanukah predates the advent of Christianity by some 200 years, so it can't in any way have copied Christmas.
 - ii. But now the bad news.
 1. It turns out that you and Jimmy aren't the first ones who've been thinking about all this.

2. Turns out that some academic scholars have been, too.
3. And some of them claim that there is no coincidence here at all here: Chanukah and Christmas coincide with one another because – make sure you’re sitting down for this – they’re actually both derived from the same ancient pagan holiday.

b. Solstice

- i. Now, that may seem horrifying – but, relax, I get it, take a deep breath, don’t throw rocks at the screen just yet – let me actually just take you through their case for a minute, then we’ll talk about it:
 1. In 1947, a scholar named Julian Morgenstern wrote a series of articles that tried to trace the roots of Chanukah to earlier festivals.
 2. As it happens, throughout the ancient world, pagan cultures would often celebrate a holiday just as the frost was really beginning to settle in – right at the time of the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year.
 3. Morgenstern claimed that Chanukah was modeled after those holidays – in particular, a holiday observed in ancient Syria.
 4. That pagan winter holiday, as it happened, involved fire rituals; and whenever those Syrians would go and dedicate a new temple to their pagan gods, they’d do it on the auspicious day of that holiday, right around solstice time.
- ii. Any of this sound familiar, folks?
 1. I mean, let’s remember: What does the name Chanukah actually mean?
 2. It means, ‘dedication’; it’s the day we rededicated our Temple to the Almighty.
 3. And lo and behold, we have these fire rituals, too, right? I mean, we’ve got these candles that we light every day of Chanukah.
 4. Well, according to Morgenstern, we’re copycats; our holiday is just a spruced up version of this pagan solstice celebration.
- iii. That’s Morgenstern’s theory.

III. The Big Question

- a. Ok, now, if he’s right, if the Maccabees were really just mimicking their pagan contemporaries, well, I don’t know about you, but for me, that would be a real letdown.
- b. So what’s the truth here?
 - i. Is Chanukah just a Jewish version of that universal winter holiday that we tacked some sort of spiritual message to?
 - ii. Is Morgenstern right? Is Morgenstern an idiot? And we’ve all been sold a lie? What’s going on here?
- c. To look for an answer, I want to take you on a journey through two Rabbinic texts that might, together, help us make sense out of all this.
 - i. These two passages in the Talmud were brought to my attention by Rabbi Ami Silver, one of our collaborators here at Aleph Beta, during a discussion we had about Chanukah several months ago.
 - ii. Anyway, I think when we look at these two passages from the Talmud, and their implications, we’ll see that the Sages themselves may have thought Morgenstern was right in one sense – and so very wrong in another sense.

- d. The first Talmudic passage may be familiar to some of you – it appears in Tractate Shabbat, and it is the text from the Talmud that gives the source for Chanukah itself.
- e. The second Talmudic passage, in Tractate Avodah Zarah, seems to come from left field, having nothing to do with Chanukah at all – but I think there is evidence that these texts somehow are in conversation with each other; that to really understand either one, you almost have to understand both. When we do understand both, I think we will also get to something rather profound, even shocking, about the true spiritual roots of Chanukah.

IV. Shabbat 22a - Mai Chanukah

- a. Let's just start with the first text here. It's in the Babylonian Talmud, in masechet Shabbat, page 22a, and it goes like this:
 - i. "What's Chanukah? Beginning on the 25th day of the month of Kislev, there is this Chanukah period for eight days in which we don't deliver eulogies and we don't fast."
 - ii. Now actually let me stop there before we go any further; just think about that basic definition of Chanukah for a minute. You know, what is Chanukah? These days during which we don't deliver eulogies and we don't fast. I mean, what is going on there?
- b. You know, if the Rabbi's asked the question: What is Chanukah? They seem to be looking for a definition.
 - i. What would you expect a good one-line answer to be?
 - ii. You know, maybe a line about what we are celebrating. The victory in the war. The miracle with the lights.
 - iii. Maybe an explanation of what we do during the holiday – we all gather around with our families and light candles at the entrance to our homes.
 - iv. After you mention all that important stuff, maybe you'd throw in a line at the end that says: And, by the way, since this is a festival, that means no fasting or eulogizing for eight days.
 - v. But, you know, you wouldn't start with that as your one-line answer to the question: What is Chanukah?
- c. But the rabbis do. That's exactly what they do.
 - i. They say: What's Chanukah? "These are the eight days in the middle of winter in which you can't fast or eulogize people when they die!"
 - ii. Only once they lay out that all-important definition do the Rabbis then go on to tell you a reason why you don't fast and you don't eulogize. There was this military victory, a miracle with lights, the Temple was restored, all of that.
 - iii. You know, so why is not fasting or eulogizing listed as such a critical definition of the holiday itself? I mean, if you conducted ten "man on the street" interviews about the most basic observance of Chanukah, how many people would immediately tell you about the lack of eulogies you hear on these days?
- d. Anyway, let's go back to the text and, just to kind of finish it up, here's what else the Rabbi's say about Chanukah.
 - i. These are the days we don't eulogize, we don't fast; why? "Because when the Greeks invaded the Temple, they defiled all of the oil that was there, and when the Kingdom of Chashmonai – i.e. the Maccabees – when they rose up against the Greeks and they defeated them, they searched around, and they could only find one jar of oil that was still sealed with the seal of the High Priest, and it only

contained enough oil to light the Menorah for a single day. A miracle occurred, and they were able to light from it for eight consecutive days. The next year, they established these eight days as a festival, a time of praise and thanksgiving to God.”

- e. I’m actually going to suggest to you that this whole business about “no fasting or eulogizing” that we were talking about is not actually a minor detail, as we’ve been assuming.
 - i. You know, as crazy as it sounds, I think it really is, in the Rabbinic view, a kind of basic definition of the holiday.
 - ii. I think the way we’ll begin to understand that is actually by looking at that second Talmudic text I was talking about before. So, let’s dive into that now.
 - iii. As you listen, you might find it sounds a bit familiar

V. Chanukah Prototype

- a. It appears in the opening chapter of tractate Avodah Zara, 8a, where the Gemara discusses two pagan holidays.
- b. Yeah, you heard me right: Our Talmud discusses holidays that really aren’t our holidays at all, but holidays of pagan origin, just like the holidays Morgenstern was talking about.
- c. Now, technically, the Gemara is doing this in order to warn Israelites about things they should refrain from doing around these holidays so as to distance themselves from pagan practices – but in the process, the Gemara ends up telling us something fascinating about the origin of those pagan holidays.
- d. Here’s what the Gemara says:
 - i. “Rav Chanan son of Rava said the festival Kalanda, it takes place for eight days following the Tekufah, which means, the winter solstice. The festival Saturnura, it takes place during the eight days leading up to the winter solstice.”
- e. So, then the Gemara goes on to explain where these two pagan holidays come from.
 - i. Turns out, the Rabbis say, the story of these holidays begins way back in the early days of Creation itself: “The Rabbis taught in the Brisa the origin of these holidays came from Adam. When the very first man, Adam, when he first saw that the days were becoming increasingly shorter [in other words, he experienced what we would call the onset of winter – but remember, he is the first man who ever lived, so he never experienced winter before; so when he saw this, the days getting shorter], he said to himself, ‘Woe unto me! Maybe it was because of my sin, eating from that Tree of Knowledge, maybe it was because of that, that I brought ruin to the world. The universe that’s growing darker and darker? Returning to a state of chaos. The chaos and emptiness that existed before the universe was even created! Maybe this is the punishment in death that God decreed for me!’ (Because remember, God had warned Adam that if he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, death would be the consequence.) So, as these days were getting shorter Adam began to fast and pray for eight straight days. With the arrival of the solstice and the beginning of the winter season, he saw a day that began to get a bit longer. So, he said, ‘Oh my goodness... This is just the way the world works! It’s the cycle of nature!’ So then he went and he celebrated for the next eight days. The very next year, he made both sets of these eight days – the days before solstice when he initially fasted and the days after the solstice when he celebrated – he celebrated both of these days! And now, the Gemara adds, almost parenthetically: “Adam

HaRishon, the very first man, he established these two holidays as festivals for God. But they, the idolaters that came after him, those pagans who celebrated his original holidays, Kalanda and Saturnura they called them, they established those very same holidays to worship the stars.”

- ii. Ok so according to the Gemara, Kalanda and Saturnura, these pagan holidays, they’re actually perversions of earlier holidays established by none other than the very first man in existence, Adam.
- iii. And here’s the really interesting thing though. This whole Talmudic discussion concerning the roots of these pagan solstice holidays – this discussion echoes, in very eerie ways, that first Talmudic discussion we looked at, the one about Chanukah; and you can see that if you just sort of put the two Rabbinic texts side-by-side and compare them.

VI. Comparison: The Rabbinic Descriptions of Adam’s Holidays and Chanukah

- a. An Eight Day Holiday in the Dead of Winter.
 - i. So let’s begin with that text in Avodah Zara.
 - ii. That text was describing these eight day festivities, these pagan festivals that take place right smack in the middle of winter
 - iii. And, lo and behold, the rabbis - with Chanukah - they are also talking to us about an eight-day festival that occurs right smack in the middle of winter.
- b. Next Year... Yamim Tovim.
 - i. And now, look at the actual text of these Talmudic statements, the actual Hebrew words in which the Rabbis articulated their ideas.
 - ii. In the case of Adam’s solstice holiday, the Rabbis tell us: “That the following year, Adam made these days into holidays.”
 - iii. Now, where did we hear language like that before?
 - iv. As it happens, we get the exact same language at one other point in the Talmud – and only one other point in the Talmud– when the Rabbis are describing the creation of Chanukah.
 - v. They say: “The very next year after the miracle with the oil, the Rabbis established these days as holidays.”
 - vi. It is a striking, unusual phrase; a phrase that resonates powerfully with the Sages’ description of Adam’s establishment of his celebrations.
- c. Now, as it turns out, the more you look at these texts, the more you see the correspondences between them.
 - i. Because it’s not just the idea of “eight-day winter holidays.”
 - ii. And it’s not just even the language the Rabbis used to describe the establishment of these holidays, a year after some initial event.
 - iii. There is even more in the Rabbis’ characterization of Chanukah that reminds us of Adam’s holidays.
- d. The Falling of Darkness and then Increasing Light.
 - i. Remember how Adam was watching the world get increasingly dark, but then when the process begins to reverse itself, he actually sees the sunlight hours increase – and then he celebrates for eight days?
 - ii. Does that remind you of anything with Chanukah?
 - iii. Think darkness and then increasing light; and an eight-day celebration to mark it?
 - iv. Oh yes, that reminds us of Chanukah quite a bit, doesn’t it?

1. After all – how do you celebrate this festival?
 2. Don't you light one candle the first night, a second the next night, and then you keep on adding candles night after night until on the eighth night, and then you've got a virtual blaze going on that table by the windowsill?
 3. And we do that, you know, for the reason the Rabbis tell us about in their Talmudic statement: There was this small amount of oil, and it looked like it would burn out in just a day.
 4. Once that would occur, there would be no more light in the Temple. It would be a dark and cold place. We would be enveloped by that darkness.
 5. But then a miracle occurred, and that oil lasted for eight days, allowing light to keep shining in the face of darkness.
 6. So we celebrate that increased light in the Temple by lighting a Menorah in our homes, increasing the amount of light in our homes, too.
- v. So all in all, aren't we celebrating on Chanukah what Adam celebrated?
1. The retreat of darkness and the gift of increasing light?
 2. We are celebrating the fact that, miraculously, the light came back after it appeared it was going away for good.
- e. And One Last Parallel: Fasting and Mourning.
- i. In fact, there's even one more connection between the texts.
 - ii. Remember how we were puzzled as to the Rabbis' description of Chanukah?
 1. They had described it as these eight days when you don't fast and you don't eulogize the dead, and we said, who cares?
 2. Why do the Rabbis lead with this?
 3. Well, isn't it curious that these themes, too, show up in Adam's holidays all the way back at the very beginning of Creation?
 4. For what exactly does Adam do that during that very first winter of Creation?
 5. He saw the world getting dark, and feared its destruction and his imminent death – and in response, Adam fasted for eight days, and he declared something while he fasted: "Woe unto me, for I've destroyed the world!"
 - iii. Look at that: There was Adam, fasting and preemptively eulogizing the dead – himself and the entire world.
 - iv. So, fascinatingly, the definition the Rabbis give to Chanukah seems to be borne of the stuff of Adam's very first festivals: Adam had fasted and mourned as he preemptively lamented his own death and then had stopped doing that when light returned and his hope in the future was restored. And every year on Chanukah we abstain from fasting and mourning just like he did.

VII. But What Does It All Mean?

- a. Parallel holidays? So all in all, we have quite a few parallels between the Rabbis' description of Adam's holidays and their description of the Chanukah festival.
- b. But, you know, it seems kind of mysterious. Because what could those connections possibly mean?

- i. I mean, it's true Chanukah has light and darkness, and Adam had light and darkness.
- ii. But big deal. Chanukah still doesn't seem essentially connected to Adam's holiday.
- iii. It's a holiday about victory over Greeks, about miracles with lamps.
- iv. Adam's holiday is about being scared the world is going to end.
- v. Why would the Sages intimate that there is some sort of basic connection here?
- c. Well, maybe Chanukah isn't only a holiday that celebrates an isolated historical event in the 2nd century B.C.E. It does celebrate that event, but maybe in doing so it is touching on something deeper.
 - i. It touches on a fear; a fear so elemental, so fundamentally human, that it relates back to the very first person who ever walked the earth.
 - ii. Chanukah and Adam's holiday are both about a terrifying encounter with darkness, and an attempt by humans to respond to it.

VIII. Adam and Darkness

- a. Let's start with Adam. What exactly was his fear when he first experienced the waning sunlight of winter?
- b. Take a look once again at the language the Talmud uses when it describes Adam's response to the ever increasing darkness. It says: "I've sinned, and now God is returning the world to the primordial chaos, the emptiness that existed before God formed this beautiful world." Adam thinks that Creation itself is being undone.
- c. And you know what, he may have had good reason for that. Because go back to the very beginning of the Torah, to the description of that original chaos: "And the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters."
 - i. Now, look at that description: There's darkness, water, and wind.
 - ii. What does it remind you of?
 - iii. It's like a winter storm.
 - iv. Adam, in experiencing his first winter, was seeing a scary reflection of the primordial chaos come into being all around him.
 - v. So if Creation is being unraveled, that leads us – leads Adam, really – toward a terrifying conclusion: The Creator, the Source of Life, is retreating from this project He once began, this project called Creation. God Himself is withdrawing from the world.
- d. We see in the Talmud's language that Adam wasn't simply afraid of the dark, or even the danger that the dark posed to him personally.
- e. Beneath Adam's fear of the dark was an even deeper fear: The fear that God was leaving forever.

IX. Fear of Abandonment

- a. And that fear made sense. Put yourself, for a moment, in Adam's shoes when he first set foot upon the earth
 - i. Here you are: You wake up in this brave new world, open your eyes and marvel at the world around you.
 - ii. You behold the heavens, the blue sky, the lush trees and plantlife and the sight of the birds and animals roaming the earth.

- iii. You are sustained by the fertile earth, the ground of life from which you were born; and you receive nourishment from the sweet fruit of the trees and the vegetation that seems to grow all around you.
 - b. But as the days go on, you begin to notice a disconcerting pattern.
 - i. Ever since you ate from that one tree that God warned you not to eat from, those dark nights seem to be getting longer; those light periods of the day seem to be getting shorter and shorter.
 - ii. You recall that God had warned you about eating from that tree; He said that it would bring death to the world – and suddenly, a terrible fear takes hold of you.
 - iii. This must be what God meant: The world dying; the Giver of All Life is departing.
 - c. What does a world look like when its Creator is leaving it?
 - i. The days are growing colder and darker, the energy is bleeding out of this once vibrant world.
 - ii. Green leaves are turning brown; they're rotting and dying on the earth.
 - iii. Trees that were once lush are now bones.
 - iv. The trees that gave you fruit aren't providing fruit anymore.
 - v. Soil that was soft and fertile is dead and hard.
 - vi. The sun that provided the world with light, warmth, and energy seems to be slipping away, day by day.
 - d. And how does Adam react to this terrible realization?
 - i. He begins to fast, to eulogize and mourn the dying world.
 - ii. When Adam believes that God is retreating from the world, he loses all hope. Seeing the withering world around him, Adam is left in total and utter despair. He eulogizes the world. He fasts.
 - e. And then, after eight days of his mournful fasting, something incredible happens.
 - i. The sun shines for a bit longer than it had the day before.
 - ii. When Adam sees this, he is shaken out of his terrible fear; he realizes that God hasn't abandoned the world after all.
 - iii. God never left His world, never left him.
 - iv. The darkness that Adam experienced was actually the way of the world, part of the cycle of nature.
 - v. This darkness was part of God's Creation, the way things go; after its depth, the world was now cycling back into more and more light. It's going to be okay.
 - vi. And Adam celebrated this moment.
 - 1. The following year, when winter rolled around again, Adam actually established two holidays – one during the eight days of increasing darkness, and one during the eight days of increasing light.
 - 2. He's celebrating the lesson he learned that first winter: God is with him in the darkness as much as He is with him in the light. God doesn't abandon His world.

X. Chanukah: The Terror of the Greeks

- a. But Adam's fear, if salved, was not entirely put to rest.
 - i. For over time, a version of that fear would resurface. It happens right around the time of the Chanukah story.
 - ii. At that moment in history, God seemed to be withdrawing, too.
- b. The story of the Jewish people seemed to be coming to an end.

- i. Think about the Jewish experience during the historical events leading up to Chanukah.
- ii. The land of Israel was under Greek rule; there was no more prophecy, and even the right to practice Torah was being abolished.
- iii. There were statues of foreign gods in the Temple, and Greek culture was permeating every corner of the civilized world.
- iv. Even worse, the enemy itself was hard to define: Many Jews decided to abandon their heritage and become Greeks themselves. They were called Hellenists.
- v. Brother turning against brother; this was a moment of deep spiritual darkness for us as a nation.
- vi. Like night, it was hard to know what was what; everything was confusing, disorienting, frightening. The world that we knew was unraveling.
- c. As the Jews of that time were witnessing this new reality, they felt a version of Adam's fear: God has retreated from our world.
 - i. The question is: Would that retreat be permanent?
 - ii. Has God abandoned His people and cast us away, into the dark hands of chaos, Hellenists, and the Greek empire?
- d. Chanukah has an answer to that question.
 - i. And interestingly, it is not quite the same as Adam's answer.
 - ii. It is as if the Maccabees response to darkness is an evolution of Adam's response, a way of building upon it.
 - iii. To see what I mean, consider this: Until now, we've seen the similarities between Adam's holiday and Chanukah.
 - iv. But there are important differences, too, and these differences tell a story. What is that story?

XI. Differences

- a. Well, what are the differences between Adam's experience and that of the Maccabees?
- b. The Talmud clued us in to those differences. Start by asking yourself this: In each story, what is the source of light, and who is responsible for that light?
 - i. Well, in Adam's story, the source of light is God, through the sun.
 - 1. In the story of Chanukah, seemingly, the source of light is man, who kindles a flame.
 - 2. Adam's holiday celebrates a time when God lit up the sky.
 - 3. But Chanukah, the holiday that we celebrate, commemorates a time when people lit a lamp.
 - 4. People were responsible for first bringing light back to the world, and God responded to their action, when He kept the flame burning.
 - ii. Moreover, when Adam celebrates the coming of light, how does he describe why it came?
 - 1. He calls it *minhago shel olam*. He realizes that there is natural order to things.
 - 2. There are cycles of light and darkness, and that's just the way God made the world.
 - 3. When the Maccabees celebrate the perpetuation of the Menorah's light for eight days, they aren't celebrating some natural cycle of things.
 - 4. As the Talmud puts it, a miracle was performed for them.

5. So they are really celebrating the very opposite of Adam's phenomenon: An overturning of the laws of nature. They are celebrating a miracle.
- c. Evolution: So what story do these critical differences tell? Why are these differences there?
- i. I think the answer is that Adam celebrates the revival of God's Light in nature. Chanukah celebrates the revival of God's Light in history.
 - ii. Adam's fear revolved around God leaving the natural world that the Creator had set up.
 - iii. The Maccabees' fear, on the other hand, revolved around the possibility that God had abandoned the world of history; that God was no longer present in the landscape of human affairs.
 - iv. These two worlds are very different.
 1. The world of nature is fundamentally a world controlled by God, not man.
 2. It is God who regulates the motion of the heavenly spheres, who is responsible for the orbits of the moons and planets that give us cycles of light and darkness in the world.
 3. It is He who is responsible for winter and for summer.
 4. Indeed, Adam's core realization is precisely this: His sin doesn't undo the cycles of nature.
 5. God unilaterally sets up the way the world works, and Adam's deeds don't change this – for better or for worse.
 6. That's his realization that the increasing light is due to *minhago shel olam*: There is a cycle at work here, a cycle which is arbitrated by God, without man's involvement at all.

XII. Passive Vs. Active

- a. All told, Adam was a passive recipient in this process.
 - i. If anything, Adam's initial mistake was that he thought that the world was going dark because of his actions.
 - ii. His great relief came when he realized that he had been wrong; that God would never leave him, that the cycles of time were impervious to his failings.
 - iii. God would never leave this world that He had created, and would never leave him.
- b. In history, though, it is not so.
 - i. In the course of history, man's actions count.
 - ii. History is really "his story" – man's story, quite literally, the story of the human project.
 - iii. It's the story that we human beings weave together with our Creator.
 - iv. In this story, there is a kind of dance between God and man.
 - v. We can take a step towards God and He can step towards us. Or we can take a step back, and He can take a step back, too.
- c. So what happens when we sense God retreating from our story? That's the key question the Maccabees faced.
 - i. Their answer was not a repeat of Adam's answer; it was an inversion of it.
 - ii. Adam fasted and mourned the darkness, eulogizing himself and the loss of the world.
 - iii. The Maccabees understood that in history you can't afford to do that.

- iv. *Minhago shel olam* won't come around and lift you out of this darkness.
 - v. In our story, if we feel that God is leaving us, then we need to actually take action.
 - vi. We can't wait for light to arrive to reassure us that God is here; on the contrary, if we want God to be here, we need to invite Him back by finding a way to kindle some light of our own.
- d. But the truth is, it's a little more complex than this.
- i. You might stand back and look at Adam and look at Chanukah and say: In the case of Adam, the source of light was God; in the case of Chanukah, the source of light was man.
 - ii. We kindled the light. The moral of the story is that man acts on his own in history.
 - iii. But that's only half the story. It's true that man kindled the light with Chanukah, but it's not really true that we were fully responsible for it. It was God that, through a quiet miracle, kept it burning for eight days.
- e. On Chanukah, God partnered with man in the creation of "his story." God turned history – his story, man's story – into the shared story of God and man.
- i. On Chanukah, the Maccabees accurately felt God taking a step back, removing Himself from the affairs of men.
 - ii. But they did not respond by eulogizing that so much as they responded by combatting it.
 - iii. They chose to act, to bring light back into the world rather than give in to the darkness. They chose to fight a battle, a battle that seemed to be futile. They chose to light the Menorah, even if only for a day, an act that also seemed to be futile. One day of light in the Temple and it goes out; big deal.
 - iv. The Maccabees took these actions because they were convinced that these were not futile actions, even if the odds were stacked against them.
 - 1. They were doing something good and right and noble; and even if they didn't have the capacity to finish the job on their own, that was okay.
 - 2. You don't have to finish the job. They were inviting God back into the world, as their partners.
 - 3. And God responded in kind. God smiled on their efforts. The war was won. The Menorah stayed lit, for eight long days, until humans could cobble together the resources to process more pure oil.
- f. Adam, in the end, was passive. And that was okay for Adam.
- i. He, after all, was dealing with the presence or absence of God in God's own world, the world of nature.
 - ii. At the end of the day, pardon the pun, God would take care of that on his own. He would bring light back into the world.
- g. But the Maccabees couldn't afford to be passive.
- i. They were dealing with the presence or absence of God in a world that humans and God share, a world they create together – the world we call human history.
 - ii. In a realm like that, God responds to human actions, in a kind of dance.
 - iii. We can invite Him back into our story.
 - iv. Ironically, God's presence in our shared world of history can often shine even more brightly than God's presence in the world of Nature, the world God rules by Himself.

- v. In nature, Adam saw God's presence in light that was "the way of the world," a function of the orderly cycles of nature. But when man invites God back into history by lighting his own light, God's reciprocation transcends the mere "way of the world."
- vi. His involvement takes the form of what we human beings call miracles.
 - 1. The continued light of the lamp that was supposed to last one day but lasted eight is an example of such a miracle.
 - 2. But it is not the only example of a miracle like that.
 - 3. Anytime humans act by proactively bringing justice, kindness, goodness, and Godliness into the world – and find that, improbably, the flame they've kindled does not go out – anytime this happens we have witnessed a miracle too.
 - 4. We have seen the mysterious partnership of God with man take another step in the grand dance of history.

XIII. Solstice – Ending

- a. So, was Morgenstern right?
 - i. Well, it seems like he was both right and wrong.
 - ii. Yes, Chanukah is the Jewish solstice holiday, a modern iteration of Adam's ancient solstice holiday.
 - iii. But it is not an imitation of pagan solstice rituals, it is a departure from them.
- b. Think about it: Adam intended his festivals to mark God's willingness to put a sense of order into the world He created.
 - i. The pagans had a corrupted vision of that order.
 - ii. They created a religion. They looked at the stars and their orderly transit through the heavens and they said, "The buck stops there."
 - iii. The stars are as high as the heavens go; it is they to whom we direct our worship.
- c. Adam's holidays, then, were not merely corrupted when later generations began celebrating the stars; their very message of hope and renewal became undone.
 - i. They were transformed back into days of despair and hopelessness.
 - ii. For what is it like to live by the mercy of the blind forces of nature? It's a life of perpetual mourning.
 - iii. The circus-like atmosphere of Saturnalia is simply a salve for a darker despair. Eat, drink, and be merry today, for tomorrow we will die alone in an uncaring world, a deterministic system.
 - iv. The reckless abandon is, in a deep sense, an articulation of a life of despair; a life devoid of a caring God who responds to the currents of human reality.
 - v. The solstice, in this worldview, is a time that grants us one more day, maybe even one more year, of life under the unforgiving orbits of the sun and the earth.
- d. Chanukah opposes all that.
 - i. It is a holiday that further refines Adam's festivals, rather than a holiday that corrupts them.
 - ii. Chanukah stands for the notion that history is a world that is different than the world of nature.

- iii. Yes, God imposes order on nature; but the world of history, of mankind's unfolding story, that's a world where goodness and justice are the shared province of God and man.
- iv. History is our story, and we therefore bear the responsibility of taking the first step.
- v. If we sense a coldness, a growing evil in the world; if we sense encroaching darkness; even if we sense God's withdrawal from our world; as sad as that is, we must not give in to the sadness.
- vi. We must not mourn and eulogize ourselves. We must seize the responsibility to act and to kindle a light, however futile that may seem.
- vii. If we do, miracles are no longer out of the question. God can meet our outstretched hand with a Divine touch of His own.
- viii. We can, and must, invite God into our story.



STUDENT RESOURCES

CHANUKAH 5777:
REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS SUSPICIOUSLY
FAMILIAR?

Sponsored by:
The Areivim Philanthropic Group
The Hoffberger Institute for Torah Study

REINDEER AND LATKES: AREN'T THE WINTER HOLIDAYS SUSPICIOUSLY FAMILIAR?

Instructions: As you watch the video, use the chart below to compare the holidays discussed. Note that the full column for Christmas cannot be completed as the sources focus on the other holidays.

	Chanukah	Christmas	Adam's Festival
What is the source of the holiday?			
How is it celebrated?			
What language is used to describe it? How is it described?			
What is the role of light and darkness?			
What is the role of fasting?			
What is the source of light? From where did it come?			

