

Women and Chanukah

The Talmud (Shabbat 23a) teaches that ‘women are obligated in regard to the [mitzvah of the] Chanukah light for they, too, were part of that miracle.’ The story of Judith is often given as one of the ways that women are understood to have been part of the miracle, along with Hannah and her seven sons, and not forgetting the daughter of Mattisyahu (ben Yochanan the High Priest).

Mattisyahu’s daughter was engaged to be married and at her wedding feast, before the Syrian-Greek official arrives to exercise his droit de seigneur, she tears off her own dress so that she will first be seen naked by Jewish men rather than by the oppressors. Her courageous actions finally shame her father and brothers into action, preventing the official from defiling her and beginning the famous rebellion the next time an idolatrous sacrifice was offered in their village... (see Megillat Taanit - 17 Elul & Midrash Maaseh Chanukah)

In North African Jewish communities, Rosh Hodesh Tevet, which falls on the (sometimes sixth and) seventh night of Chanukah, was celebrated as Chag haBanot, the Festival of the Daughters. There is a tradition of Rosh Hodesh being marked as a women’s holiday, and for R.H. Tevet this grew to include celebration of Judith and other female heroes associated with Chanukah.

Chag haBanot traditions included:

- women going to the synagogue to touch the Torah and pray for the health of their daughters
- parents giving gifts to and blessing their daughters
- bridegrooms giving gifts to their brides
- girls who had been fighting would reconcile
- passing down inheritances from one generation of women to the next
- a feast of dairy foods
- old and young women dancing together
- telling Judith’s story (some Ashkenazim had the tradition of doing this on the eighth night of Chanukah, in Yiddish)
- sermons in honour of heroic women

Another group of women connected with Chanukah are the Four Women of Light:

- Sarah – the matriarch is the first woman to light candles at the beginning of Shabbat
- Rebekah – inherited this task from Sarah – and like Sarah, Rebekah’s lights also (miraculously) burned for the whole week, lighting their tents
- Esther – also known as Ayelet haShachar – for kindling a light of hope in the dark time of Haman’s plan to eradicate the Jewish people
- Deborah – the wise Judge known as the Woman of Lapidot – and ‘lapid’ in Hebrew means ‘torch/flame’, so the Talmud calls her a Woman of Flames

Chag haBanot ritual for 7th night of Chanukah

(edited version of **Rabbi Jill Hammer**'s suggestion on www.ritualwell.org)

- Light the first candle in honor of Judith and all Jewish women heroes throughout history.
- Light the second candle in honor of women heroes that you admire (name names).
- Light the third candle in honor of women teachers and spiritual leaders whom you know (again, name names, including relatives and friends).
- Light the fourth candle in honor of Jewish mothers and grandmothers, including your own.
- Light the fifth candle in honor of all Jewish girls.
- Light the sixth candle in honor of your family. (This candle can be special for daughters, or you can have the candle represent the whole family, men and women, boys and girls.)
- Light the seventh candle in honor of the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling presence of God that is in every person (in Jewish mystical tradition, the Shekhinah is depicted as female).

The Chanukah blessings:

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ יְהוָה מְקוֹר הַחַיִּים, אֲשֶׁר קִדְשָׁתָנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְצִוֵּתָנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Berucha Aht [Yah](#) Mekor Hahayim asher kidshatnu
bemitzvoteyha vetzivatnu lehadlik ner shel Hanukah.*

Praised are You God, Source of Life, who makes us holy through your commandments and commands us to light the Hanukah candles.

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ יְהוָה מְקוֹר הַחַיִּים שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ נִסִּים לְאֲמוֹתַיִם וְלְאֲבוֹתַיִם
בְּיָמִים הָהֵם בְּזַמַּן הַזֶּה.

*Berucha Aht Yah Mekor Hahayim she'astah nisim
le'imoteynu vela'avoteynu bayamim hahem bazman hazeh.*

Praised are You God, Source of Life, who performed miracles for our ancestors in their day at this season.

Gifts: Choose an heirloom you've been meaning to pass down, a gift with family or personal significance, a photograph of a female ancestor, or a spiritual gift such as a blessing or poem. You could also write a letter in which you talk about familial qualities or values you hope to pass on. Give the gift [to a girl or woman you want to honor] after candle lighting on the seventh night of Chanukah with a spoken or written explanation of its significance.

Pray for the health of women in your family: aunts, grandmothers, daughters, and mothers. After candle lighting and gift-giving, share any personal thoughts about what difficulties and struggles the women in your family face in the coming year and how you can help them. Then use the following healing prayer or one of your own:

May the One who blessed Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, bless and heal (insert names) and grant them vitality and courage. May they be strengthened as the heroes of Chanukah were strengthened. May they be granted the boldness of Mattisyahu's daughter, the fierce love of Hannah, and the wisdom and bravery of Judith. Send blessing on all the works of their hands, and show them kindness, peace, justice, and compassion. Amen.

Now enjoy a delicious dairy meal and read/discuss the stories of Judith and other heroic women!

For the Fifth Night of Chanukah,

a ritual for men,

honouring Mattathias' five sons, courtesy of telshemesh.org:

Before you light the shamash, recite the following kavvanah:

Just as we light this flame of the soul, so you, Adonai, have lit the souls of many to give them strength and faith. Tonight, we honor those soul-flames, who are the keepers of your world, watching from north, south, east and west and from the sacred center to care for the earth. Just as the Maccabees were five, we turn to the five levels of our own soul to rekindle them at this time of fiery renewal.

Recite the Chanukah candle-lighting blessings

As each of the five lights of the menorah are lit, mention one of the following:

- five ancestors;
- five heroes you admire;
- the five directions east (representing light), west (representing the weathering of storms), north (representing mystery), south (representing blessing), and center (representing holiness), and people who represent them for you.
- the five levels of the soul: body (nefesh), emotion (ruach), mind (neshamah), soul (chaya), and Divine spark (yechidah);
- the five names of the sons of Mattathias: Judah, Jonathan, Jochanan, Eliezer, and Simon.

Once you have lit the menorah, take a **lulav or other branch and wave it in the five directions** to indicate cleansing or rededicating the Temple. Sing a song about peace, holiness, or light while doing this. You can have all people present do this to **spiritually cleanse themselves**.

This can be a time to invite each person present to **mention a personal intention or goal for the coming year**. Invite them to consider how they can dedicate themselves to this goal at every level of the soul.

After lighting, sing Chanukah songs and eat latkes or doughnuts fried in oil to represent the menorah in the Temple. Give gifts representing the four elements, or maybe the five books of the Torah (a picture of the patriarchs and matriarchs for Genesis, haggadot or seder plates for Exodus, challah board for Leviticus where the challah offering is mentioned,

water bottles or traveling gear for the wandering of Numbers, a tape recorder for Moses' long speech in Deuteronomy).

Be funny and creative! [Clearly this one was created for men]