



Creating a Hanukkah Ritual

Topic

Hanukkah

Grade Level(s)

- 3rd – 6th
- Can also be done with parents as a family activity.
- Note: This lesson can be made Shabbat-friendly for communities that offer school on Shabbat and observe traditional Shabbat practices. Notes for such communities are included within.

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Develop a new ritual to commemorate Hanukkah
- Begin to appreciate the challenges inherent in creating rituals
- Connect the challenges they experienced developing a new ritual to a classic debate between the schools of Shammai and Hillel

Materials needed

- Extra paper (lined or unlined)
- Pens/pencils
- Copies of “Hanukkah Information Sheet,” one per team
- Copies of “Ritual Brainstorming Sheet,” one per team
- Copies of “*Beit* Shammai/*Beit* Hillel Perspectives” sheet, one per team
- File Folder for each team, containing Hanukkah Information Sheet and a Ritual Brainstorming Sheet and pens/pencils.

Prepare in Advance

- Put into each file folder (one per team) one copy of the Hanukkah Information Sheet, one copy of the Ritual Brainstorming Sheet, and extra paper. Label each folder “Team 1,” “Team 2,” etc.

Technology needed

- Device to take videos and show them to the class



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Background for Teachers

Hanukkah is a holiday that reflects postbiblical historic events, which means that rituals developed around it were created after the *Tanakh* was codified, specifically during the rabbinic period. One of the main rituals developed by the rabbis was to light candles. Specifically, each household was to light one candle each night and display it for all to see. However, those households who wanted to engage in *הַיְדוּר מְצִינָה* (beautification of the *mitzvah*) could have each member of the household light one candle each night. Meanwhile, a *מַחְלָקָה*, a debate, sparked for those who wanted to engage in the highest form of beautification (Tractate Shabbat 21b).

- According to *בֵּית שַׁמַּי* (the School of Shammai), one should light eight candles on the first night and decrease by one candle each night to finish with one candle on the last night. Two reasons are given for this opinion. The first is that the candles indicate the number of days that have passed in Hanukkah. The second is that there is evidence that the original celebration of the rededication of the Temple was a delayed Sukkot celebration since the Maccabees and their followers were hiding in caves during Sukkot (II Maccabees 10:6-7). Sacrifices are offered on each day of Sukkot with a descending number of bulls offered each day (13 on the first day, 12 on the second day, etc. (Numbers 29:12-34)).
- According to *בֵּית הֵלֵל* (the School of Hillel), one should light one candle on the first night and increase by one each night to finish with eight on the last night. Two reasons are given for this opinion. The first is that the candles mark how many days are left in Hanukkah. The second is that Beit Hillel hold by the concept of *ma'alalin be'kodesh ve'ein moridin*, one should increase in holiness and not decrease.

Today, what was considered the highest form of beautification by *Beit Hillel* is the standard way to light.



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Description of Activities

Step 1: What is Ritual?

- Ask students to imagine that they work on a creative team that invents rituals.
- Remind students what a ritual is: “a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.” (Definition according to OxfordDictionaries.com)
- Ask students for examples of rituals many people from the general population celebrate. (Examples: singing the national anthem at a sporting event, having dinner with family and friends on Thanksgiving.)
- Ask students for examples of specifically Jewish rituals. (Examples: lighting Shabbat candles, reading the Torah on Shabbat, saying *Kiddush*.)

Explain:

- Your creative team has been assigned to create a ritual to celebrate a holiday called Hanukkah.
- You know nothing about celebrating Hanukkah except for the information given in this portfolio.
- Your team’s task is to use the information in the portfolio to create a ritual that reflects the essence of Hanukkah.

Step 2: Brainstorming a New Hanukkah Ritual

- Divide students into teams of 2-4.
- Give each team a portfolio that contains a Hanukkah Information Sheet and a Ritual Brainstorming Sheet and pens/pencils.
- Students review the information sheet as a team and create a ritual together.

Step 3: Sharing New Hanukkah Rituals

- Teams share their rituals with other groups and explain why they developed the ritual the way they did.

Step 4: Connecting New Hanukkah Rituals to Old Debates

Explain:

- Since Hanukkah commemorates a historical event and is not mentioned in the Torah, there are no guidelines from the Torah about how to celebrate it.
- Therefore, when people began celebrating the rededication of the Temple, there were no rules about how to light candles — or even that we needed to!



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- This meant that what your teams just did — creating a new ritual to commemorate Hanukkah — was similar to the process that rabbis thousands of years ago had to do as well.

Ask:

- Based on your experiences working on creating a new ritual for Hanukkah, what sorts of things do you think the rabbis debated when they tried to create a ritual for Hanukkah?
- Do you think they all agreed right away on how to make a ritual for Hanukkah? Why or why not?

Explain:

- As you likely know, the rabbis decided that one of the ways to commemorate the rededication of the Temple was to light candles as a way to celebrate the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days.
- However, as you probably experienced in your group, there were some disagreements about how to exactly do this.
- In fact, there was a big *מחלוקת*, disagreement, between the two prominent schools that existed as the rituals were evolving.
- One was named *Beit Shammai*, the other *Beit Hillel*.

Read the following descriptions aloud:

- ***Beit Shammai*** believed that the most beautiful way to perform the *mitzvah* of lighting Hanukkah candles is to light eight candles on the first night and then decrease by one each night until lighting one on the eighth night. There are two reasons given for this order. The first is that it helps us count the number of days of Hanukkah yet to come. The second is that some sources indicate that the first Hanukkah was a delayed celebration of Sukkot since the Maccabees and their followers were hiding in caves when the holiday actually fell on the calendar. During the time of the Temple, sacrifices were offered on each day of Sukkot with a decreasing number each day (13 bulls on the first day, 12 bulls on the second day, etc.) Thus, the candles remind us of the sacrifices offered on Sukkot.
- ***Beit Hillel*** believed that the most beautiful way to perform the *mitzvah* of lighting Hanukkah candles is to light one candle on the first night and then increase by one each night until lighting eight on the eighth night. There are also two reasons given for this order. The first is that it helps us count the number of days that have already passed. The second is that *Beit Hillel* believed in the concept of *ma'alin be'kodesh ve'ein moridin*; one should increase in holiness and not decrease. (Another example of this concept is that one counts the days of the *Omer* from 1 – 49.)



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Step 5: Creating How-to Videos

- Divide students into teams again. (Depending on dynamics, it can be the same groups as before, or new groups.)
- Distribute one copy of “*Beit Shammai/Beit Hillel Perspectives*” to each team
- Assign each team one of the schools’ perspectives.

Explain: Each team will develop a how-to video for lighting Hanukkah candles based on one of the schools’ perspectives.

The video must:

- Be 30-60 seconds long
- Mention the school’s name (i.e. *Beit Shammai* or *Beit Hillel*)
- Include at least one reason that the school said that you should light candles in a particular way.
- Include each member of the team in some way.

Students develop, shoot and present their how-to videos. Remind students to look into the camera and speak clearly.

Step 6: Debrief

Ask:

- Why do you think the Sages agreed that we should light candles on Hanukkah?
- Why did *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel* disagree? Which argument — *Beit Shammai*’s or *Beit Hillel*’s — do you personally find more compelling and why?
- How was the debate between *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel* similar to or different from debates you had in your group when you created your ritual?