

Dear Haverim,

Mai Hanukkah? The Talmud opens its brief discussion on Hanukkah with the words “*Mai Hanukkah*, What does Hanukkah commemorate?” The reasons why we celebrate every other Jewish holiday are abundantly clear. We know why we celebrate Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. We are aware of the spiritual work that needs to be accomplished on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; but what is the reason for celebrating Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is the only holiday that is not recorded anywhere in the *Tanach*. The Rabbis struggled to find meaning to attach to this holiday, and throughout history Hanukkah has held many different meanings. At times, Jews have emphasized religious freedom and championing the rights of religious minorities. At other times, Hanukkah is celebrated as the military victory of establishing the place of refuge for Jews, and of course there is the well-known story of the oil miracle. Since it is almost impossible to define the historical Hanukkah, each of these meanings is important.

In the uncertainty of why celebrate Hanukkah lies one of the most important lessons of the holiday. . . Hanukkah highlights the need for Jews in every generation to demonstrate religious creativity. Without innovation, Judaism would become stale and unable to respond to the current times. This has never been the approach of Judaism; instead, every generation of Jews developed ways to make Judaism relevant and meaningful to their location and era. Hanukkah clearly demonstrates this idea.

However Hanukkah began, it developed and thrived as a Jewish festival full of new customs, rituals, and liturgy. The essence of Hanukkah is the power of religious innovation. Judaism must continue to make its religious message and teachings relevant to the world in which we live so we can continue to spread light and holiness to our world.

Judaism is not a tradition that exists only in sealed books or within the walls of the synagogue. Instead, each and every one of us is compelled to make Judaism part of our lives each and every day. As we light the candles tonight, think about new customs that are demanded by our day, and the ways that they can be incorporated in our Jewish tradition so that we may grow Jewishly and future generations will benefit.

Shavua Tov, Hag Urim Sameach, and Hodesh Tov
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