

December 7th to 15th  
25th of Kislev - 3rd of Tevet



# חנוכה

## CHANUKAH

By: Rabbi Dr. Kelita Cohen

**A light in dark days**  
*Why do we light candles on Chanukah?*

*The answer given by Rava<sup>1</sup> to this question is: "mishum pirsumei nisa"<sup>2</sup> – "to give publicity to the miracle". This is why the tradition is to put the lighted chanukiah in the window, so that it can be seen by passers-by.*

*In dark times, we may be faced with the dilemma of whether to publicize our Jewishness or keep it private. The crypto-Jews are an example of those who, due to a threatening context, have kept their Jewish practices secret. From the Iberian Inquisition to Nazi Germany, many chanukiot certainly had their lights kept away from their windows.*



*How do we deal with maintaining our traditions in a hostile environment like the one we're experiencing? So abruptly and unexpectedly, we are faced with anti-Semitism on our doorsteps, and we start to hear that maybe it's better for our children not to go out in the streets wearing their Jewish school uniform, or maybe it's better not to wear a kippah in non-Jewish public places, or to avoid Jewish or Israel-related props, in order to avoid attacks.*

*The Talmud itself, which announces the publicity of the miracle, also brings from an oral tradition the following caveat: "In a moment of danger, it [the chanukiah] can be placed on the table and that is enough to fulfill the mitzvah"<sup>3</sup>.*

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1. Talmudic rabbi of Babylon, in the period of the Gemara

2. Talmud, Shabbat 23b

3. Talmud, Shabbat 21b:8, a baraita.



*But lighting the Chanukah lights in the window can also be an act of resistance. As the Festival of Lights, we celebrate it most authentically when we shine a light in dark times.*

*Although it is a rabbinical festival, the sages indicate the first reference to Chanukah at the very beginning of the Torah. In a midrash on the second verse of Bereshit, it says: "And darkness covered the surface of the abyss': Darkness - alludes to the Greek exile, that the Greeks darkened Israel's eyes with their decrees<sup>4</sup>".*

*In addition to the miracle and the lights, Chanukah is the festival of resistance par excellence. The people of Israel had already faced great crises and serious threats to their lives (as in Persia, remembered on Purim), to their existence as a people (in Egypt, during the time of slavery), to their permanence in the land of Israel (as in the Babylonian exile), but never such a direct challenge to their religious practices. Antiochus IV's attack was directed at Judaism. No one before him had tried so hard to eradicate Jewish observance and monotheism.*

*With their particularities, recent events can echo past traumas. The following list of episodes is taken from the history of the Hasmonaim, around 167 B.C.E., either in the books of Maccabees or in the book of Judith. But, as we shall see, they could well be a description of recent history, on October 7th:*

- **Violent invasion of the land of Israel:** The story of Chanukah becomes, through this parallel, the trauma of the invasion of the sacred precinct, the Beit Hamikdash, the House that is our homeland.
- **Kidnapping and murder of women and children:** The book of Maccabees<sup>5</sup> tells the story of Hannah, a mother who was seized by Antiochus Epiphanes with her seven children. Each of them murdered with a degree of cruelty like those that flooded Israel's newspapers two months ago.
- **Murder of the elderly:** the book of Maccabees<sup>6</sup> describes the murder of Eleazar, an elderly scribe.
- **Violations and rape:** In rabbinic literature, "bait" (house) is also synonymous with woman. In Judith Kates' reading of the story of Judith, the village invaded is Bethulia, an allusion to the Hebrew word "betulah", virgin. The Jewish people are personified as a virgin threatened with violent penetration.





*Rabbi Shimon Sofer (1850-1944) refers to the light of Chanukah as not only commemorating a past miracle, but perhaps offering something miraculous in the here and now: the ability to serve as a bridge between us Jews and everyone around us, because *pirsumei nisa* concerns the other, more than ourselves. At a time of so much distancing from the people around us, it's important to remember that the light of Chanukah can serve as a powerful tool to bring us closer together.*

*From the bloody event of the Maccabees against the Seleucid army, our tradition has creatively fashioned a festival of lights. We hope that at some point soon we will be able to heal from the trauma experienced on October 7, heal the wounds and, perhaps, even develop a new ritual with music as its highlight, in honor of the victims of the Nova Music Festival in Re'im.*

*But today, as an act of resistance, may "the lighting of the candelabra be a testimony to the whole world that the Divine Presence rests among Israel?"*

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7. Talmud, Shabbat 22b:2

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Chanukah means  
inauguration.  
With this text,  
Kelita Cohen  
inaugurates her  
journey as a Rabbi.