

Chanukah and Soviet Jewry

Introduction

Chanukah is a time to celebrate miracles. Like the Jews in the days of the Maccabees, the Jews in the Soviet Union were also prohibited from studying Torah and practicing their Judaism. In this lesson, we look at the theme of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, as a metaphor of hope in the face of darkness.

Objectives

Explore the themes of hope and inspiration that are embedded in the holiday of Chanukah.

Big Ideas	Jews are responsible for one another (solidarity).
	You can make a difference.
Content	To explain the Jewish values that led Jewish people to fight for Soviet Jewish rights.
	To relate the historical events that led to freedom for Soviet Jews.
Skills	To build a civic engagement plan.
	To contribute to causes relating to (Jewish/all) human freedom.
Meaning	To reflect on your obligation to help (Jewish/all) people in need.
	To reflect on the power of a common (Jewish) voice.

Duration: 45 minutes + 5 minutes with candle lighting each night.

Materials

- a printout of the blessings for Chanukah,
- source sheet for students

Procedure

1. Read the text: Read the text, written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for the OU, found on the source sheet.

2. Guided Discussion: After you have read the source sheet, discuss the following questions related to the text and the holiday of Chanukah.

- How was life for Jews under Alexander the Great similar to life for Soviet Jews?
- What do we learn from the Maccabees?
- Why did the Maccabees bother to search for oil? What do we learn from this?
- What has survived from the suffering of Jews in the FSU? Why did Soviet Jews begin to seek a new life in Israel in 1967?
- According to Rabbi Sacks, how did Gorbachev become part of the Chanukah story? Do you agree?
- What is the Jewish response to tragedy, according to our history?
- How is the tradition of lighting candles a logical response to remembering tragedy?
- Why do Shabbat candles take priority over Chanukah candles?
- Why did some communities want to stop celebrating Chanukah?
- How are the words in *Hatikvah* a reflection of the fact that we still celebrate Chanukah, Pesach, Yom HaShoah, etc?
- Why do some people light Chanukah candles outside?
How does the way in which we light Chanukah candles inspire us to make the world better?



3. **Conclusion:** Listen to the Peter, Paul and Mary sing a famous Chanukah song that you can hear [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1cRXgDFiSs): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1cRXgDFiSs>

- How do the words relate to the Chanukah story?
- How do they speak to the experience of Soviet Jews?

4. Extension

- **Younger Students:** students can decorate the blessings sheet and create notecards with the inspirational thoughts to share for each night of Chanukah.
- **Older Students:** students can research and come up with their own list of chanukah themed inspiration to share at candle lighting.