

What Hanukkah Teaches About Commitment and Openness. Prof. Yakov Rabkin

By [Prof. Yakov M. Rabkin](#)

Global Research, January 02, 2025

Theme: [Religion](#)

Hanukkah is, perhaps, the easiest Jewish holiday to celebrate. There are no restrictions on what one may or may not do—no fasting and, in fact, no prohibitions except one: the lights of Hanukkah must not be used for any practical purpose, not even for studying Torah or lighting the Sabbath candles.

Hanukkah candles are symbols of faith—faith in miracles, i.e., in something we consider impossible according to our life experience. This is the essence of the holiday that celebrates the impossible: a small flask of oil that would normally keep the light going for one day lasted for eight days.

The order of lighting the candles was debated by prominent rabbinic schools. Shammai stated that eight candles should be lit on the first night, seven on the second night, and so on, down to one on the last night. He argued that the miracle was greatest on the first day. Hillel, on the other hand, favored starting with one candle and lighting an additional one every night, up to eight on the eighth night. For Hillel, the miracle grew in greatness each day, and it is Hillel's opinion that prevails to this day. Some see in this order an allusion to one's ability to grow spiritually and intellectually, even though it is a law of nature that the body declines with time.

This is not the only time the number eight denotes something that transcends nature. One of the most observed Jewish rituals, circumcision, is performed on the eighth day, signaling that human effort is required to go beyond nature and thereby connect the newborn with Jewish continuity. In the story of Creation, the number eight signifies new beginnings because the eighth day was the first day after the first Sabbath, which began right after the creation of the first human.

One cannot help but notice that, according to the Book of the Maccabees, both circumcision and the Sabbath were prohibited in the context of mass Hellenization. Some Jewish men even underwent operations to restore their foreskin to appear fully Greek.

Faith is something intimate. Hanukkah lights are to be lit at a window or door so that they can be seen from outside. However, the lights must remain inside the home. Thus, the lights embody the tension between our inner selves and the external expectations and circumstances we face. It is our inner light, often hidden even from ourselves, that serves as a personal lighthouse, guiding us through stormy waters and helping us make life choices. Inner light may sometimes be seen from the outside, but faith is not for show even though, when genuine, it may subtly inspire others.

This tension between the internal and external is also present in another aspect of

Hanukkah: the encounter between Jewish and Greek cultures about 22 centuries ago. Hellenized Jews sought to join the majority culture and become part of it. Other Jews opposed them, and a civil war ensued. However, the sages of the Talmud are far from praising the intransigence of the Hasmoneans, who started the war and usurped royal privileges reserved for the Davidic dynasty. Ambivalence toward Greek culture—the dominant culture of the time—is evident in Talmudic discourse, alongside an aversion to violence. This may explain why the Talmudic sages excluded the story of the Maccabees' triumph, culminating in the holiday of Hanukkah, from the Judaic canon (1 Maccabees 4:59).

Our tradition associates Jewish culture with Shem and Greek culture with Japheth, two sons of Noah. The Talmud specifies that Japheth must be brought into the tent of Shem and given space within it. In other words, Greek culture has intrinsic value but must be absorbed and integrated within the Jewish framework. Indeed, the language of the Talmud abounds with Greek terms, such as *Sanhedrin* or *afikoman*, to name just two. However, these terms stand for distinctly Jewish concepts: a tribunal convened at the Jerusalem Temple and a broken matzah used in the Passover ritual. Greek notions are thus assimilated into Judaic discourse. A strong inner core of commitment to Judaism allows one to partake in outside culture without losing oneself or disappearing altogether. This lesson remains as relevant as over two millennia ago.

*

Click the share button below to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Global Research's Holiday Fundraiser](#)

This article was originally published on [The Times of Israel](#).

Yakov M. Rabkin is Professor Emeritus of History at the Université of Montréal. His publications include over 300 articles and a few books: *Science between Superpowers*, *Interactions between Jewish and Scientific Cultures*, *A Threat from Within: a Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism*, *What is Modern Israel?*, *Demodernization: A Future in the Past and Judaïsme, islam et modernité*. He did consulting work for, inter alia, OECD, NATO, UNESCO and the World Bank.

Featured image is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. Yakov M. Rabkin](#), Global Research, 2025

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. Yakov M. Rabkin](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca