



Jewish Board of Family
and Children's Services, Inc.

Lessons from Hanukah as the End of Life Nears

Jews recite two blessings before lighting the Hanukah candles. (On the first night we also praise God for sustaining our lives and bringing us to this moment.) In the second blessing we praise God who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, at this season. Jewish tradition is actually unsure of exactly what miracles we mark on Hanukah. To what extent is Hanukah the story of human actions which led to miraculous results and to what extent is all of the action on the part of God? Jews have inherited a belief in the possibility of miracles, not only in the distant past but in our time as well. Many believe that miracles can be personal as well as national. The belief in miracles is one of our strengths, but it is also one aspect of our culture which makes decision making near life's end so difficult. As long as there is life, we hold on to the possibility of more time, a cure, complete recovery. When such things happen, as they sometimes do, even the most secular among us use the language of miracle. We wonder if we are allowed to make decisions about treatments which seem to close off the possibility of that miracle. Some insist on aggressive, invasive procedures even when these act to postpone death without sustaining life. I believe Jewish tradition offers other ways of understanding the truth of the Second Blessing. We praise God for the miracles which occur daily - breath, community, the sun rising each morning replacing darkness with light. When we pray for miracles we need to be open to the possibilities that the miracles are caring, love, reconciliation, controlling pain and other physical discomforts. The miracle is the right person appearing at just the right time to offer something which is needed. We are taught that we cannot depend on extraordinary miracles, and so we must act in the best ways we know as human beings. We are taught to accept natural limits and focus on the care we can offer, grateful for the miracles of modern medicine and the blessings of being mortal.

The Talmud records some early debates about the exact obligation for lighting Hanukah candles. Originally, just a single candle was lit on each night. Current Jewish practice follows the teaching of Hillel that we begin with one candle and add another each day. This offers us a powerful challenge of increasing light in our lives and in the world. On the other side of the debate Shammai declares that on the first day we light eight candles and decrease the number each night. Although we don't follow his teaching in practice, there are some important lessons as we confront mortality. We begin our lives in full light, full of potential, but no matter how long our life, ultimately our time is limited. Yet every moment of life is significant, just as one single candle fulfills the obligation to publicize the story. One of the spiritual choices we have to make, whether as a caregiver or as the one who is ill is how to value the light even when it is much more fragile than before.

Even the smallest of flames from a single candle can light a new candle and start a new process. How can we help an older person or one who is living with a life threatening illness to light new lights? Can they share stories, prepare an ethical will or simply model presence and love at the time of flickering?

When we light the Chanukiah, we use an extra candle, the *shamesh*/helper to light the other candles. We are not allowed to use the actual Hanukah candles for this task.

Sometimes in the course of caregiving or decision making, we think we can do it all our selves. We believe that we don't need help, or that we can't count on anyone else. The *shamesh* reminds us that we all need help. The *shamesh* candle in itself is identical to the other candles. Every candle has the possibility of fulfilling the mitzvah and every candle has the possibility of being the helper. In our lives we need to remember that we play each of these roles at various times in our lives.

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