



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

## **Night Four: Miracles in Community** **Naima Hirsch Gelman, Class of 2024**

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Those who have either studied Masechet Shabbat or the origins of Hanukkah know that the Gemara first discusses the practical implications of lighting Hanukkah candles before explaining the reason why we actually *celebrate* Hanukkah. Despite having explained the ritual obligations and mechanisms around lighting Hanukkah candles, the practice of lighting candles is not part of the answer to “mai Hanukkah,” “What is Hanukkah?” ([Shabbat 21b](#)). Instead, we are told that the rabbis established *yamim tovim behallel u’hoda’ah*, holidays to recite Hallel and offer thanks, in commemoration of the first Hanukkah when one cruse of oil lasted for eight days. And while the practice and imagery of Hanukkah candles are a big part of how I, and Jews around the world, celebrate the holiday, there’s more we can learn from the connection between miracles and gratitude.

The Gemara specifically mentions hallel and hoda’ah, Hallel and thanksgiving. [Rashi explains](#) that hoda’ah, thanksgiving, refers to Al haNisim, the Hanukkah-themed insertion for the Amidah and Birkat haMazon, which belies the assumption that hallel and hoda’ah are interchangeable. Rashi’s explanation makes perfect practical sense in that there’s a difference between praising God and thanking God, and that on Hanukkah, we should do both. We thank God for enacting a miracle, and praising the attributes through which She made those miracles occur. We aren’t supposed to take miracles for granted, and therefore, cannot let them occur without acknowledgment.

The connection between miracles and gratitude isn’t limited to Hanukkah. In Masechet [Brachot 54a](#), the Gemara teaches us that we must recite brachot of gratitude for both personal and communal miracles. In fact, the Gemara states that there is a chiyuv, a ritual obligation, to recite these brachot when visiting the location in which they occurred:

The Rabbis say: On a miracle performed on behalf of the multitudes, everyone is obligated to recite a blessing; on a miracle performed on behalf of an individual, only the individual is obligated to recite a blessing.



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The Gemara offers some examples of personal miracles, including surviving a lion attack, finding water while traveling, and hiding from a wild camel loose in the marketplace, which are a stark contrast to the kinds of supernatural events in its list of communal miracles such as the splitting of the Red Sea, Lot's wife turning to salt, and the defeat of Jericho (among others.) This contrast teaches us to think beyond the supernatural archetype of a miracle when looking for God's presence in our lives; the dumb luck of surviving wild animals is just as miraculous—and deserving of blessing—as the nature-defying feats we read about in the Torah. And while I personally have never survived an attack from a wild camel while shopping for my groceries, there are definitely moments in my own life that seem miraculous in reflection.

One such moment happened in the months leading up to my first semester of college. I had been experiencing some health difficulties, which led to an emergency hospitalization just days before Hanukkah. It was a dark and heartbreaking time in my life, and I couldn't see the way out. In the days following my release, I spent Hanukkah in the Drisha beit midrash with other college students, immersing myself in Torah and community. Singing Hallel every morning made it possible for me to think about God's role in what happened, and I wanted to recognize that. So I arranged to say birkat hagomel, the blessing that is said after surviving a life threatening event, after Torah reading. While it wasn't the spiritual moment I had hoped for at the time, I look back on that Hanukkah of Torah and song with fondness and gratitude.

The connection I made between my personal miracle and birkat hagomel is an echo of the Gemara in [Masechet Brachot](#). After expounding on the specific *brachot* one should recite at the sites of historical miracles, the Gemara teaches us about what we now call birkat hagomel. It lists four categories of people—seafarers, those who “walk in the desert,” someone who recovered from illness, and someone who was freed from incarceration—who must offer thanks in the presence of a minyan. The Gemara brings a proof for the necessity of a minyan from a verse in the Book of Psalms, but I believe that there's something powerfully intuitive about thanking God for something personal in the presence of community.

This balance between personal and communal is brought to the forefront when we celebrate Hanukkah. When we light our Hanukkah candles, we usually focus more on our individual homes and families instead of our larger communities. After all, Masechet



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Shabbat teaches us the mitzvah of Hanukkah candles is specifically performed by every household. Yet the lighting of those candles is multiplied from household to household, uniting the whole Jewish community in the celebration of the miracle.

This year, I'm feeling the intimate relationship between the personal and the communal more strongly than ever. In the wake of the terror, fear, and violence that surrounds us right now, I don't think I'll be able to celebrate Hanukkah the same way. Each person who suffers from the horrors of war is praying for their salvation along with that of their community. The safe return of each hostage is a miracle for the entire Jewish people, but an even more significant miracle for their loved ones. However, the inverse between the connection of personal and communal miracles is the connection between individual pain and communal pain that becomes more pronounced every day. I am experiencing what's happening in Israel from a distance, as another Diaspora Jew with ties to Israel and her people. I don't personally know anybody who has died or been kidnapped. The tragedy is not personally mine, but being in Jewish community means that grief is just one connection away. And I know that I'm not alone in this feeling; Jews all over the world are acutely feeling loss, worry, and fear, regardless of if they knew any of the October 7th victims or abductees personally.

There isn't much that comforts me these days, but I feel reassured by how the Jewish community is holding our shared grief. And while I don't know if I'll be able to mean it when I sing Hallel this year, I do know that the candles I'll light, and the candles my family, friends, and neighbors will light, will remind me that I'm not alone in my grief. I'll know that all over the world, we're thinking of our siblings in acute personal pain right now, who are mourning their loved ones and shattered sense of safety and normalcy. This year might not be one of hallel and hoda'ah, but it will be one of strength, of connection, and of resilience.

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