



# The Wonder of Miracles: A Family Learning Activity

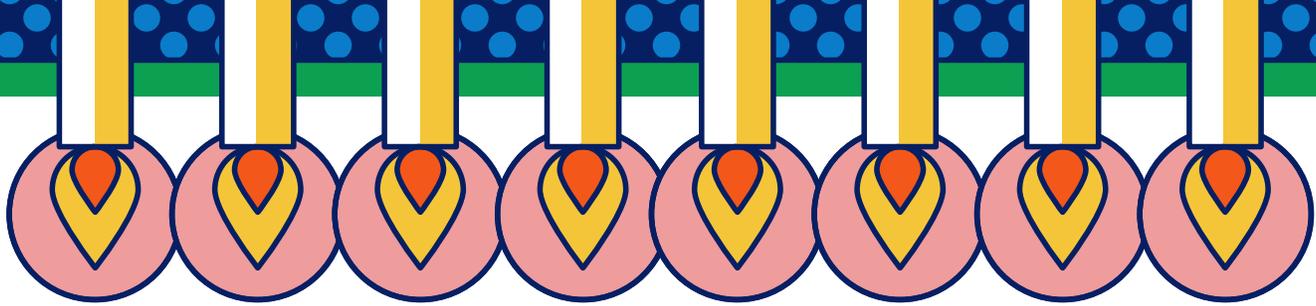




Hadar's Children and Families Division is building a network of families and young adults aspiring to a shared religious vision. Through ongoing classes, a tutoring network, and meaningful resources, we are investing in the next generation and building a world animated by our core values of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed.



Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP) is a research-based educational model that teaches a set of attitudes and skills to strengthen how we engage in Jewish learning and meaningful conversation with others. Powered by the Hadar Institute, PoP provides professional development to educators and leaders, conducts a fellowship program for a growing network of schools, and develops ready to use materials for educators and families.



# The Wonder of Miracles

*"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."*

—Albert Einstein

In the ancient world, there are miracles everywhere you look: the burning bush, the parting of the sea, or oil lasting for eight days, just to name a few. These kinds of miracles make God's presence in the world very clear. But in today's world, God's presence isn't always seen or felt in the same way. Modern miracles don't necessarily break the laws of nature, but they are part of everyday life, and it is on us to notice these miracles with eyes filled with wonder.

And that's how we should look at sacred texts, too. When we do that, we are better at thinking about multiple meanings, being curious, and generating ideas. Wondering is what helps us ask some very important questions about texts like: "What could this mean?" This is even better when we wonder with other people, who can help us open meanings we might not have seen by ourselves. And we must always remember that even the text itself is wondering about something.

As we wonder about miracles, we should ask ourselves:

**What is a miracle?**

**How do we experience miracles in our lives?**

These resources look at three different ways of experiencing miracles. We hope this small handful of texts—like the small jug of oil—will fuel your wonder as you learn through them over Hanukkah, and give you a chance to experience a bit of the miraculous in your learning and in the world around you.



# God can perform a miracle for you!

One miracle Hanukkah celebrates is the miracle of lights, so it's a great chance to read about other miracles of light in our tradition, like this one from the Talmud.

First, read the text. Then, together with someone in your home, read it again with each of you playing a different role. Remember to give the emotion you think fits! Discuss what each of you notice in the text and in your role play.

חד בִּי שְׁמַשִּׁי חֲזִייה לְבִרְתִּיה  
דְּהוּוֹת עֲצִיבָא  
אָמַר לָהּ: בְּתִי אֲמַאי עֲצִיבַת?  
אָמְרָה לִיה: כְּלֵי שֶׁל חוּמֶץ נִתְּ-  
חֲלַף לִי בְּכֵלֵי שֶׁל שֶׁמֶן וְהִדְלַקְתִּי  
מִמֶּנּוּ אוֹר לְשַׁבַּת.  
אָמַר לָהּ: בְּתִי מַאי אֲכַפֶּת לָךְ?  
מִי שֶׁאֲמַר לְשֶׁמֶן וְיִדְלוֹק הוּא  
יֹאמַר לְחוּמֶץ וְיִדְלוֹק.

- תלמוד בבלי תענית כה.

One Shabbat evening, [Hanina ben Dosa] saw that his daughter was sad.

He said to her: My daughter, why are you sad?

She said to him: I switched a vessel of vinegar with a vessel of oil and I lit the Shabbat lamp with it (the vinegar—vinegar is much worse at burning than oil, meaning that they will soon be left in the dark).

He said to her: My daughter, what are you concerned about? The One Who said to the oil that it should burn can say to the vinegar that it should burn.

- Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 25a

Hanina ben Dosa's daughter is sad because she accidentally used vinegar instead of oil for her Shabbat candles, and she thought those candles wouldn't last long enough to give enough light for Shabbat. Hanina ben Dosa assures her that even oil only burns nicely because God makes it do that, and that God could make the vinegar burn just as well.

# God can perform a miracle for you!

## ? Questions to consider

- 1 What is Hanina ben Dosa trying to tell his daughter?
- 2 How do you think the daughter felt when her father tried to comfort her?

The Gemara above concludes by telling us how things turned out with the candles:

תנא: היתה דולקת והולך כל היום  
כולו עד שהביאו מִמְנוֹ אור  
להבדלה  
- תלמוד בבלי תענית כה.

A tanna taught: That lamp burned continuously the entire day (all through Shabbat), until they brought from it light for Havdalah.

- Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 25a

## ? Questions to consider

- 1 How does this conclusion change our understanding of the story?
- 2 How would the daughter feel after seeing the candle stay lit all Shabbat? How might this affect her relationship with God?
- 3 How would you feel if you saw something like vinegar burning for the entire Shabbat?
- 4 What new ideas does this story give you for your own thinking about miracles?



Try this out at home! With the help of a grown up, place a wick in a bowl of vinegar and another wick in a bowl of oil. What happens when you light the wick? Does the wick burn in the bowl of vinegar?

# Who makes the miracles happen?

These two texts present different versions of what the miracle of Hanukkah was.

As you read these two versions of the Hanukkah story, notice what similarities they share and what is different. (The Hasmoneans is another name for the Maccabees). If you are reading this with someone else, share what you notice with each other.

מאי חנוכה?

דיתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי  
דחנוכה תמנאי אינו דלא למספד  
בהון ודלא להתענות בהון.

שקטשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל  
השמן שבהיכל.

וקטגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי  
ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך  
אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו  
של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא  
להדליק יום אחד.

נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה  
ימים.

לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים  
טובים בהלל והודאה.

- תלמוד בבלי שבת כא -

What is Hanukkah?

As our rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev [begin] the eight days of Hanukkah, during which it is forbidden to have funerals or to fast.

For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they made all the oils in the Temple impure.

And when the Hasmonean kingdom triumphed and defeated them, they could only find one flask of oil upon which the seal of the high priest [was undamaged], and there was only enough oil in there for one day of light.

A miracle happened; they lit from it for eight days.

The next year, they established the [eight days] as festival days with Hallel and thanksgiving.

- Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b

מה ראו לעשות זו שמונה...

אלא בימי יון נכנסו בני חשמונאי  
להר הבית ושבעה שפודין של  
ברזל היו בידיהם וחספום בבעץ  
והיו מתעסקין בהם כל שמנה

- סכוליון למגילת תענית

...Why did the Hasmoneans make it (Hanukkah) eight days?

...(During the war with the Greeks, the menorah was stolen.) In the days of Greece, the Hasmoneans went to the Temple Mount with seven iron spears in their hands, and they covered them with tin (to create a make-shift menorah), and they used it for all eight days.

- Scholion on Megillat Ta'anit

# Who makes the miracles happen?

## ? Questions to consider

- 1 What do you wonder about the making of the make-shift menorah described in the second source?
- 2 What do you think this text is teaching us about the attitude of the Hasmoneans?
- 3 Are these texts disagreeing, or could they be trying to teach similar messages?
- 4 Can the two stories fit together? If so, what would that add to our understanding of the Hanukkah miracle? What might God have noticed about what the people were doing that made God want to allow the oil to last for eight days?
- 5 When people work super hard, sometimes the results surprise them—they are able to do more than they thought they could. Has that ever happened to you? Do you think that could be considered a kind of miracle?

# Recognizing daily miracles

Think about a part of your body that does its job and helps you in some way. What does it allow you to do? Has it ever stopped working well, even for a short amount of time (like when you were sick)?

What happened then and how did you feel?

This Gemara considers miracles that are part of everyday life and that often go unnoticed or taken for granted. In particular, it focuses on an odd word in a verse from Psalms: לְבַדּוֹ (alone).

...אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: מֵאִי דְכַתִּיב  
(תהלים עב, יח-יט) עוֹשֵׂה נִפְלְאוֹת  
לְבַדּוֹ וּבְרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹדוֹ לְעוֹלָם?  
אֶפְיָלוּ בְעַל הַיָּס אֵינוֹ מְכִיר בְּנֶסוֹ.

- תלמוד בבלי נדה לא.

...Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of the verse: "Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, Who does wondrous things alone; and blessed be God's glorious name forever" (Psalm 72:18–19)?

It means that even the person for whom the miracle was performed does not recognize the miracle that was performed for them.

- Talmud Bavli Niddah 31a

## ? Questions to consider

- 1 The Talmud cites Psalm 72:18–19, and concludes that there are sometimes miracles that are not recognized and are taken for granted. How does the word לְבַדּוֹ (alone) support this idea?
- 2 What miracles might Rabbi Elazar be referring to? Check for clues in the text, and also think about your own experiences.
- 3 Are there times these kinds of things happen to you? Do you think they're miracles? Why didn't you notice it at first, and what made you notice it later?
- 4 How can we become more aware of noticing everyday miracles?



# Recognizing daily miracles

Here is a midrash on a similar verse from a different Psalm:

"לעשה נפלאות גדלות לבדו"  
(תהלים קלו:ד). וכי אחר  
עשה עמו דבר שהוא אומר  
לבדו?

אלא הוא לבדו יודע מה  
פלאים עושה.

כיצד? אדם נתון על המטה  
והנחש לפניו על הארץ,  
בא לעמד הרגיש לו הנחש  
מלפניו ואינו יודע מה פלאים  
עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא עמו.  
ומי יודע? הקדוש ברוך הוא.

~ מדרש תהלים קלו

"Praise the One Who does wondrous things alone" (Psalm 136:4). Is there another who does things with God that it should say God does it "alone"?

Rather, it means that God alone knows the wonders God does.

How so? A person lies on their bed and a snake is on the ground just in front of them. The person gets up to stand, the snake trembles before them, and this person doesn't know what wonders the Holy Blessed One has done for them.

But who does know? The Holy Blessed One.

~ Midrash Tehillim 136

## ? Questions to consider

- 1 Has someone ever done something for you and you didn't know about until later? Who takes care of you at night when you're sleeping? Who takes care of getting you things you need? This midrash teaches that there may be miracles like this in our lives, and offers us some important lessons to take with us as we move forward from Hanukkah.
- 2 What kinds of miracles is the midrash referring to? Are they the same as the miracles the first source is talking about, or are they different?
- 3 What examples of these kinds of miracles can you think of from your own life? Do you consider them miracles?

