A STUDY FOR GRADES 8–12 · BY DR. LORRY BLACK

Whose Chanukah Is It?

Rebels, rulers, and the choice to add light

Grades 8–12
Religious school or day school

Two sessions
About 60 minutes each

Plus an optional debate
The trial of the Maccabees

Enduring understandings and essential questions

By the end of this study, students should leave understanding that Jewish disagreement is old and real, and that Jewish unity is a choice we keep making anyway.

Enduring understandings

Students will understand that…

1. Chanukah began as a conflict among Jews over how to live Jewishly in a Greek world, not only as a war against an outside empire.
2. The Maccabees were rebels. Their revolt saved Jewish practice, and it also used force against other Jews.
3. Power can turn liberators into oppressors. The Hasmonean kings repeated many of the wrongs their family once fought, and their infighting cost the Jews their independence.
4. The rabbis deliberately reshaped how Chanukah is remembered, moving the focus from military victory to light and spirit.
5. Disagreement is built into Judaism. Our tradition preserves the losing side of an argument and distinguishes *machloket l'shem shamayim* from division that destroys.
6. Jewish unity means mutual responsibility, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, not agreement on everything.

Essential questions

1. **Overarching:** When Jews disagree deeply about how to be Jewish, what do we still owe each other?
2. **Session 1:** Is it ever right for Jews to use force against other Jews? Who decides who is a hero and who is an extremist?
3. **Session 1:** How do rebels become the rulers they fought against, and what could stop it?

4. **Session 2:** Why did the rabbis remember Chanukah the way they did, and what should we choose to remember?
5. **Session 2:** What makes an argument *l'shem shamayim*, and how do we argue that way in our own community today?

Before we begin

The Chanukah story you learned as a kid is true, but it is not the whole truth. Before it was a war against the Greeks, it was a fight among Jews over what it meant to be Jewish. The rebels who won went on to found a royal family, and some of those kings treated their fellow Jews as badly as the empire they replaced.

Over the next two sessions you will read the history, look at the original sources, and wrestle with real dilemmas faced by real Jews. You will probably disagree with each other. That is the point, and it is also very Jewish.

> ### Our big question: When Jews disagree deeply about how to be Jewish, what do we still owe each other?

How this packet works. There are two sessions and an optional debate. Each session has the same four parts:

1. **The story:** a short reading of what happened.
2. **The sources:** what people at the time (or soon after) actually wrote.
3. **The dilemma:** a hard choice, with no answer key.
4. **Talk it through:** questions for pairs and the whole group.

> LEADER NOTE · WHY THIS STUDY, AND WHY NOW
>
> Jewish communities are often sharply divided, over Israel, over politics, over how to be Jewish at all. Students will feel that echo, and they should. Keep it an echo.
>
> The ancient story is not about who was right; it is about what happens to a people when its members stop seeing each other as family. If a student draws a direct modern parallel, redirect to how people treated each other, not which side they took.

> LEADER NOTE · PACING
>
> Each session runs about 60 minutes. In 45, shorten the warm-up and use two of the "Talk it through" questions. To run the whole study in one 90-minute block, do Session 1's warm-up, story, and Modi'in dilemma (questions 1 and 4), then Session 2's candles source, *Kol Yisrael arevim*, the "Talk it through" questions, and the candle. The debate can be a third session if you want one. Session 1 is deliberately unvarnished, including executions and a massacre described by Josephus; read it before you teach it.

Our brit: how we argue

Jews have argued for 3,000 years and are still one people. The rabbis gave us a test for a good argument:

> כָּל מַחֲלֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם
>
> *Kol machloket she-hi l'shem shamayim, sofah l'hitkayem.*
>
> Every argument for the sake of heaven will last. (Pirkei Avot 5:17)

The rabbis' model of a good argument is Hillel and Shammai, two schools that disagreed on almost everything. Their model of a bad one is Korach, who argued to win power. Before we start, we agree to argue like Hillel and Shammai.

1. **We argue l'shem shamayim.** We are here to get closer to the truth, not to win.
2. **Ideas, not people.** We can say an idea is wrong. We never call a classmate a traitor, a sellout, or a "bad Jew." Nobody in this room is a Hellenizer or a Maccabee.
3. **Say it back first.** Before you disagree, restate the other view until its owner says, "Yes, that's what I mean." Beit Hillel taught Beit Shammai's opinion before their own.
4. **No names from today's headlines.** We can talk about how our community treats people who disagree. We do not need to name politicians, candidates, or groups to do it.
5. **Disagreeing is Jewish. Dehumanizing is not.** Anger at an idea is fine. Contempt for a person is out of bounds.
6. **Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh.** We are responsible for each other. What someone shares about their family or their views stays in this room.
7. **Anyone can call a pause.** Say "pause" and we stop, breathe, and come back.

Signed: _____

> **LEADER NOTE**
>
> Read the brit aloud together in Session 1 and post it on the wall. When a conversation heats up, point to the number, not the student ("That's a number 2 moment"). If you need to pause, use it as a teaching moment: the Hasmonean kings had no pause button.

Session 1 · From rebels to rulers

ABOUT 60 MINUTES

Warm-up: the gymnasium

It is 174 BCE and you are 16. A Greek gymnasium just opened in Jerusalem, right below the Temple. Your friends go every afternoon to learn Greek, philosophy, and public speaking, which is how you get ahead in this world. Your grandmother says going there betrays everything your family stands for. Your best friend says, "We're still Jewish. We just also live in the real world."

Take a stand. One wall is "I'd go." The other is "I'd stay away." Stand where you belong on the line between them. Two people from each end explain why.

> LEADER NOTE
> Keep this to five minutes. The goal is for students to feel the pull of both sides before they learn the history. Note where people stood; you'll come back to it at the end of Session 2.

The story

The split (175–167 BCE). For 150 years after Alexander the Great, Greek culture, called Hellenism, spread across the Middle East. Many Jews loved it, many feared it, and most were somewhere in between. In 175 BCE a Jew named Jason bribed the Seleucid king Antiochus IV to make him high priest, and he built that gymnasium. Three years later a man named Menelaus outbid him and paid his debts with gold from the Temple, and the two men's supporters fought in the streets. In 167 BCE Antiochus stepped in. He banned Shabbat, circumcision, and Torah study, and turned the Temple into a shrine to Zeus. The persecution came from outside, but the crisis started inside.

The rebellion (167–160 BCE). In the village of Modi'in, the king's officers ordered an old priest named Mattathias, of the Hasmonean family, to offer a sacrifice to the Greek gods. He refused. When another Jew stepped forward to do it, Mattathias killed him and the king's officer, then fled to the hills with his five sons. His son Judah, nicknamed Maccabee (probably "the hammer"), led a guerrilla war against the empire and against the Jews who sided with it. The rebels tore down altars, punished Jews they saw as traitors, and circumcised boys by force. Not every observant Jew joined them. In 164 BCE, on the 25th of Kislev, Judah's army retook the Temple and celebrated for eight days: the first Chanukah.

The kings (142–63 BCE). The Maccabees won, and then they ruled. The Maccabees and the Hasmoneans are the same family. "Maccabee" began as Judah's nickname and came to mean him and his brothers. "Hasmonean" is the family name, from an ancestor of Mattathias called Hashmonai. In 142 BCE Judah's brother Simon became ruler and high priest, and in 140 BCE the people made those offices hereditary. Every ruler after him was a direct descendant of Mattathias, and within three generations the rebels had become the establishment:

- The rebels' own descendants took Greek names: Hyrcanus, Aristobulus, Alexander.
- John Hyrcanus forced the Idumeans to convert or leave, and destroyed the Samaritans' temple.
- Aristobulus I jailed his mother, who starved to death, and had his own brother killed.

- Alexander Jannaeus fought a six-year civil war against Jews who opposed him, many of them Pharisees, the teachers whose heirs became the rabbis. Josephus says 50,000 Jews died.
- His widow, Queen Salome Alexandra, chose differently. She made peace with the Pharisees and ruled nine quiet years.
- Her sons fought each other for the throne, and both asked Rome for help. In 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey took Jerusalem, and Jewish independence was over.

The family line: Mattathias → his sons Judah, Jonathan, and Simon → Simon's son John Hyrcanus → Hyrcanus's sons Aristobulus I and Alexander Jannaeus, and Jannaeus's wife Salome Alexandra → their sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II.

The sources

1 MACCABEES 1:11, 14–15 (adapted translation)

In those days some rebels came out of Israel and persuaded many people. "Let's go and make a covenant with the nations around us," they said, "because ever since we separated from them, many disasters have come upon us." … They built a gymnasium in Jerusalem and abandoned the holy covenant.

1 MACCABEES 2:23–25 (adapted translation)

A Jew came forward in front of everyone to offer a sacrifice on the altar in Modi'in, as the king had ordered. Mattathias saw it and burned with zeal. He ran and killed the man on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar.

JOSEPHUS, *ANTIQUITIES* 13.372–373, 380 (Whiston translation, adapted)

As Alexander stood upon the altar on the festival of Sukkot and was about to sacrifice, the nation rose against him and pelted him with citrons… [Years later, after defeating his Jewish opponents,] as he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of all the city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified; and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes.

TALMUD, SOTAH 49B (retold)

When the Hasmonean kings were at war with each other, Hyrcanus besieged Jerusalem and Aristobulus was inside. Every day the people inside lowered a basket of coins over the wall, and the people outside sent up an animal for the Temple's daily offering. One day, instead of a lamb, they sent up a pig. When it was halfway up the wall, the rabbis say, the whole Land of Israel shook.

LOOK CLOSELY

- Who is the first person killed in the Chanukah story?
- These sources call the Maccabees' Jewish opponents "rebels" and "sinners." What do you think those Jews called themselves?
- In the Talmud's story of the pig, the siege isn't Greeks against Jews. Who sends the pig?

LEADER NOTE

This session is deliberately unvarnished. Name it out loud: "This is violent, and it was Jews doing it to Jews." Let students react before you move on. Students may push back that the Greeks really were persecuting Jews. They were, and that matters. The point is not that the Maccabees were villains. It is that heroes can be zealots too, and that power can turn rebels into the thing they fought. Salome Alexandra is the key counterexample: someone in the same family chose differently.

The dilemma: the crowd at Modi'in

WHAT DO YOU DO?

You are standing in the crowd at Modi'in. The man who stepped forward to sacrifice was your neighbor. You know he has three kids and the soldiers were watching his house. Now he is dead on the altar, and Mattathias is calling out, "Whoever is zealous for the Torah, follow me!"

A Follow Mattathias into the hills. The empire is destroying Judaism, and someone has to fight back, even if it gets ugly.

B Stay home and protect your family. Keep your Judaism in secret and wait for the storm to pass.

C Look for a peaceful way, even though you know the empire may not offer one.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. **Pairs:** Was your neighbor a traitor, a coward, or a frightened father? Can he be more than one?
2. Is it ever right for Jews to use force against other Jews over how to practice Judaism? If yes, when? If no, what would you have done instead?
3. Within three generations, the rebels' family was doing what they once fought against. Was that inevitable? What could have stopped it?
4. **Whole group:** Can we still celebrate Chanukah knowing all this? What exactly would we be celebrating?

Session 2 · Adding light

ABOUT 60 MINUTES

The story

The rabbis who shaped the Judaism we practice lived hundreds of years after the Maccabees. By then they had seen the Second Temple destroyed by Rome in 70 CE and a second Jewish revolt crushed in 135 CE. The Talmud says the Temple fell because of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred between Jews (Yoma 9b).

So they made choices about how to remember Chanukah. They left the Books of Maccabees out of the Tanakh. When the Talmud asks, "What is Chanukah?", it tells a story about a jar of oil, not a war. And for Shabbat of Chanukah they chose a haftarah with a pointed message:

לֹא בְחַיִל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ כִּי אִם בְּרוּחִי

Lo v'chayil v'lo v'choach, ki im b'ruchi.

Not by might, and not by power, but by My spirit. (Zechariah 4:6)

The rabbis did not erase the Maccabees. The Al HaNisim prayer still thanks God for the victory. But they moved the spotlight from the sword to the light.

The sources

TALMUD, SHABBAT 21B: THE OIL (retold)

מַאי חֲנוּכָּה? *Mai Chanukah?* What is Chanukah?

When the Greeks entered the Temple, they made all the oil impure. When the Hasmonean family won, they found just one jar still sealed by the high priest, enough for one day. A miracle happened, and it burned for eight.

TALMUD, SHABBAT 21B: THE CANDLES

Beit Shammai says: On the first night, light eight candles, and then one fewer each night. Beit Hillel says: On the first night, light one, and then one more each night. Why does Hillel add? One reason the Talmud gives:

מַעֲלִין בַּקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֵין מוֹרִידִין

Ma'alin bakodesh v'ein moridin. In holiness we go up, not down.

TALMUD, ERUVIN 13B AND YEVAMOT 14B (retold)

Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued for three years. Finally a heavenly voice said: אֵלּוּ וְאֵלּוּ דִּבְרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים, *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim*, "These and these are both the words of the living God," but the law follows Hillel, because they were kind and humble and taught Shammai's opinion before their own. And even though the two schools disagreed about serious questions of Jewish law, they still married into each other's families.

TALMUD, SHEVUOT 39A

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh. All of Israel is responsible for one another.

LOOK CLOSELY

- Hillel won the argument about candles, but Shammai's opinion is still printed in the Talmud. Why keep the losing side?
- Hillel and Shammai disagreed about almost everything and still married into each other's families. What did they not do that the Hasmonean brothers did?

TALK IT THROUGH

Now turn the story toward today. Every Jewish community has its arguments, and ours is no exception.

1. **Pairs:** Which moment in the Chanukah story does our community feel most like right now: Jason's Jerusalem, the crowd at Modi'in, the brothers at the wall, or Hillel's study hall? Why?
2. Hillel taught the other side's view first. What would that look like in a real conversation you might have this month?
3. **Whole group:** *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh.* What do we owe a Jew we think is badly wrong?

LEADER NOTE

Hold the brit firmly here. Students may want to argue the issues themselves. Gently steer back: today's question is not who is right, it is how we treat each other while we disagree. If a student shares that their family is divided, thank them and don't probe.

Closing: one more candle each night

The Chanukah story is full of Jews who were sure they were right and willing to hurt each other to prove it. It is also the story of the rabbis who looked at all of that and chose to teach their children about light. Shammai's candles go down each night. Hillel's go up. We follow Hillel, and we still keep Shammai's words on the page.

We will never all agree, and we are not supposed to. A Jewish community is not a place without arguments. It is a place where the arguments happen inside the family, where we still sit at the same table, light the same candles, and refuse to let a disagreement become a reason to stop being one people.

The chanukiah has one candle that stands apart: the shamash, the helper. Its only job is to give its light to the others, and it loses nothing by doing it.

Your candle. On the paper candle you were given, write one concrete way you will add light this Chanukah to someone you disagree with. Not a feeling, an action. We will build our class chanukiah from your candles.

> LEADER NOTE
> If there's time, have students return to the gymnasium line from Session 1 and notice whether anyone moved. Close by lighting (or turning on) a single shamash in a darkened room and reading the closing paragraph aloud.

Optional third session · The trial of the Maccabees

> **Resolved: The Maccabees are the heroes of the Chanukah story.**

Each student or small group plays a character from the story, argues from inside that person's life, and uses the sources from this packet. Then everyone steps out of character for the vote.

Role	Who you are	What you care about most	Your strongest source
Jason's student	A young Jerusalemite who trained at the gymnasium	Opportunity, the wider world, a Judaism that can survive in it	1 Maccabees 1:11 (read it from your side)
Maccabee fighter	One of Judah's soldiers in the hills	Survival of Torah and the Temple, by any means necessary	1 Maccabees 2:38–41
The neighbor's widow	Wife of the man Mattathias killed at the altar	Her children, and the fact that her husband was a Jew too	1 Maccabees 2:23–25
A Chasid	A pious Jew who wanted peace, not war	Torah without bloodshed	Session 1 story ("Not every observant Jew joined them")
A Pharisee under Jannaeus	A teacher of Torah who opposed the king	Justice, the people's voice, the Torah over the throne	Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.380
An Idumean	Grandchild of a family forced to convert	Belonging, and whether forced faith is faith	Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.257
Salome Alexandra	The queen who made peace	Proof that leaders can choose differently	Session 1 story
A rabbi, 500 years later	Judge, not debater; speaks last	What the next generation should learn	Shabbat 21b and Zechariah 4:6

How it runs (about 40 minutes)

1. **Prepare (10 min):** Each group reads its role and finds two lines of evidence.
2. **Opening statements (10 min):** One minute per role, in order from the table.
3. **Cross-examination (10 min):** Each role may ask one question of one other role. Answer in character.
4. **The rabbi rules (3 min):** The rabbi does not say who won. The rabbi says what Jews should remember.
5. **Step out and vote (7 min):** Everyone leaves their role and votes on the resolution as themselves: yes, no, or "it's complicated" (with one sentence explaining why).

LEADER NOTE

The brit applies in character too. Characters may be angry; students may not be cruel. Watch the widow and the Idumean roles; they carry the most emotional weight and often change the room. If time is short, cut to five roles: the student, the fighter, the widow, the Pharisee, and the rabbi.

Timeline and sources

All dates are approximate and BCE unless marked CE.

When	What happened
332	Alexander the Great conquers the region; Greek culture spreads
175	Jason buys the high priesthood and builds a gymnasium in Jerusalem
172	Menelaus outbids Jason; street fighting between their supporters
167	Antiochus IV bans Judaism and defiles the Temple; revolt begins at Modi'in
164	Judah Maccabee retakes and rededicates the Temple on 25 Kislev
160	Judah killed in battle; his brothers carry on
152	Jonathan becomes high priest, appointed by a Greek king
140	The people make Simon's offices hereditary; the Hasmonean dynasty begins
134–104	John Hyrcanus rules; forcibly converts the Idumeans
104–103	Aristobulus I takes the title of king; kills his brother
103–76	Alexander Jannaeus rules; civil war with the Pharisees
76–67	Queen Salome Alexandra rules in peace with the Pharisees
63	Brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II fight; Pompey takes Jerusalem
37	Herod, of Idumean descent, becomes king under Rome
70 CE	Rome destroys the Second Temple
c. 500 CE	The Babylonian Talmud, with its Chanukah story, takes final form

Sources used in this packet

- 1 Maccabees 1:11–15; 2:23–25; 2:38–41 (translations adapted for students; 2:38–41 is cited in the debate)
- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.257–258 (cited in the debate), 13.372–380 (William Whiston translation, 1737, public domain)

- Talmud Bavli: Shabbat 21b, Eruvin 13b, Yevamot 14b, Sotah 49b, Yoma 9b, Shevuot 39a
- Pirkei Avot 5:17
- Zechariah 4:6 (haftarah for Shabbat Chanukah)

All of these texts, in Hebrew and English, are free to read on Sefaria.

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