

## FOCUS: Reinventing Chanukah

# A New Spin in the Synagogue

*From “Vodka & Latkes” to “Chanuplex,” Reform congregations are shining a creative light on Chanukah.*

BY ANDI L. ROSENTHAL

These days, in most synagogues, the festival rooted in the miraculous liberation and rededication of the ancient Temple is a low-key affair limited to a menorah-lighting during a regularly scheduled Shabbat service.

But not everywhere. Some Reform congregations are engaged in a new spin on the Festival of Lights.

### LATKE-THONS & CLASS CANDLE-LIGHTING

Wanting “to fill the void of worship that was left by families feeling that home was the only place to celebrate, we created a series of celebrations and activities that would bridge home and synagogue traditions,” says Jason Nevarez, assistant rabbi of Congregation Shaaray Tefila in Bedford, New York. For 2008, the temple’s high school youth group is planning a first-time event called the “Latke-thon,” preparing hundreds of potato latkes in the temple’s kitchen and promptly delivering them to homebound congregants.

For the past several years, parents are invited to a religious school class candle-lighting using *chanukiot* that the students make in class. Each grade holds its lighting ceremony on a different day, and the class lesson incorporates a different theme of the Chanukah story. “For the smaller children,” explains Rabbi Nevarez, “we focus mainly on the story itself, the notion of how miracles can come out of everyday objects like oil and candles. We help older chil-

dren think about ways they can bring more light into the world, such as collecting food for a local shelter.”



### KESHER, VODKA & LATKES

Chanukah-related social justice and *mitzvah* projects also bring congregants from home into Temple Shaaray Tefila on New York City’s Upper East Side. Rabbi Marci Bellows leads the “Kesh-er” program, in which nearly one hundred congregants prepare holiday packages comprised of a *chanukiah* and candles, potato pancake mix, gefilte fish, and a sweet Chanukah dessert for needy and housebound Jewish seniors in the community. Participants in the Kesh-er program deliver the packages and often stay and chat with the recipients, helping them to celebrate the holiday as part of a community. The temple’s 20- and 30-something Young Profes-

sionals group donates pajamas and storybooks to a local children’s charity at the temple door before their annual “Vodka and Latkes” Chanukah cocktail party. And this year the holiday party is taking on a new twist, with congregant and Jewish chef Julian Medina instructing the younger generation in the art of Chanukah cooking.

### GROUP MENORAH-LIGHTING

A number of congregations encourage members to bring their home menorahs into synagogues for shared *chanukiah* (menorah) lighting and connection. At Temple Or Rishon in Orangevale, California, the menorah-lighting follows a congregation-wide Shabbat dinner. “Not only do we get to share in the lighting,” says Lisa Maisel, the congregation’s Outreach fellow, “but we also see a variety of menorahs, from traditional to homemade to modern.”

And a year ago, to add to the excitement, Or Rishon added a menorah-making contest open to everyone, “from the tiniest of tots to family collaborations,” says Maisel. Everyone then brought their homemade menorahs to the sanctuary, the overhead lights were dimmed, and nearly one hundred individual menorahs were lit, including the temple’s own six-foot-tall *chanukiah*. “All of these elements together,” Maisel says, “made us feel very relaxed and at home within our temple family.”

### EVERY CHANUKIAH TELLS A STORY

At Temple Shalom in Lafayette, Louisiana, religious school students are invited to bring a *chanukiah* from home

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