

FOCUS: Reinventing Chanukah

Try This at Home

Two Reform Judaism magazine readers share their innovative approaches to illuminating Chanukah.

1 Let There Be Light on the Festival of Lights: For a holiday that calls itself “The Festival of Lights,” there is, ironically, very little light in Chanukah. Three-inch flaming candles that burn out in 20 minutes just don’t do it justice. How can something so fleeting be the highlight of the holiday?

That’s why, about three years ago at Chanukah time, when my three children and I toured Fort Lauderdale on an evening boat ride, we were thrilled to behold “Happy Chanukah” lights on the balconies of some high rises. What an acknowledgement of our holiday! Upon our return home, I asked my husband, Marty, if we could do something similar next year.

After brainstorming, he came up with the idea of using our trees to form a living menorah. We wrapped a cluster of nine mature trees in our front yard with blue lights and topped each one with a string of white lights to simulate flames. (The lights were strung higher on the middle tree—the “*shamash*.”) In the week leading up to Chanukah, we switched on the blue lights. Then, on the first night of Chanukah, we “lit” the white “candle” atop the *shamash* and first tree. Each night we lit another candle until a forest of blue and white illuminated our yard.

Since we live in a town with few Jewish neighbors, we were more than a little nervous about people’s reactions. Early on I heard someone say, “Well, it’s about time they put up Christmas lights,” so to clarify our message, my husband hammered a Jewish star, fashioned from scraps of wood and

adorned with multicolored lights, to the center tree. By the eighth night of the holiday, there was no question that we had a living menorah in our front yard.



A holiday celebrating victory in war has now also become an occasion to affirm peace.

Not everyone appreciated our display (one person stuffed some garbage in our mailbox), but there was an outpouring of support from Jews in the neighborhood, who left notes of appreciation. One read: “Thank you for your lights! My son is usually so sad this time of year because he feels his holiday is ignored. He was so excited to see what you had done. We plan to drive by every night!” Another read: “We enjoy seeing your forest of blue lights. It is so beautiful!” A third: “We hope you continue to do [your menorah] every year.” Many of our Christian neighbors also commented on the beauty of the lights. And all of us, including our three children—Amanda, 16, Alec, 12, and Chance, 7—have come away with a glowing sense of Jewish pride.

—Beth C. Friedman, Temple Har Shalom, Warren, New Jersey

2 Eight Principles, Eight Women: Adapting from Kwanzaa, a relatively new holiday celebrated by African Americans in which each day of the

holiday is dedicated to a different principle, I dedicate each night of Chanukah to a principle exemplified by a biblical Jewish woman, reciting: “On this evening we light a candle for [principle below], exemplified by [female leader below]”:

1. Justice: Deborah was a great judge respected by Israeli society because of her sage and hopeful counsel. (Judges 4:1-5:31)

2. Peace: Serach bat Asher brought peace and comfort to Jacob by telling him gently, through song, that his son Joseph had not been killed,

as reported by his brothers. (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Genesis 46:25)

3. Sisterhood: Rachel ensured that her sister Leah had the honor of being Jacob’s first spouse by teaching Leah how to imitate her so Jacob had no idea it was Leah under the *chuppah*. And so in this way, no shame came to Leah. (BT: Bava Batra 123a)

4. Lovingkindness: Rivka drew enough water to satisfy the thirst of Isaac’s servant Eliezer and his camels. Thus did Eliezer find a kind and loving wife for Isaac. (Genesis 24:16-22)

5. Compassion: Miriam had a vision that her mother would give birth to a child destined to become a great leader. Sharing this vision with her parents, she gave them the courage to have another child despite Pharaoh’s decree to kill all male infants. Thus was Moses born.