



BURNING QUESTIONS: A CHANUKAH ARGUMENT GUIDE

At For the Sake of Argument, we think it's almost always a good time for a healthy argument, but especially when friends or family are gathered. For Chanukah, a time when many people gather to light candles and eat latkes (potato pancakes), we suggest you heat up your gathering by introducing an argument.

Priya Parker, in her book "The Art of Gathering," suggests that no gathering is complete without some warmth. A party with boring conversation is a boring party; people don't get to know each other as well, and they don't feel stimulated. At For the Sake of Argument, we suggest heating up your Chanukah celebrations by introducing a small Chanukah-related controversy.

For each night of Chanukah, we've written an essential question along with a bit of background. These questions should spark interesting disagreements that will provide you and your friends and family with an opportunity to learn something new about the holiday, about Jewish practices and history, and about each other.

We'd love to hear how these arguments warmed up your winter holiday. Write to us, or send us a video to tell us how it went. And, if you've come up with your own questions to argue over, send them our way too.

NIGHT 1 A military success, or a miracle?

Thousands of years of powerlessness in exile led the rabbis to emphasize the miraculous element of this festival. Oil that was only due to last one day, lasted eight, and in so doing the Temple was able to be rededicated to God. Yet the early Zionists chose to emphasize a different, larger element of the Book of Maccabees: A military victory. What should we celebrate? The miracle of the oil, or the uprising of the indigenous people against their occupiers?

NIGHT 2 What is more important: to seek inspiration, or face reality?

In the Talmud, Shabbat 21a, there is a disagreement about how to light the Chanukah candles. The house of Shammai says that we should light all eight candles on the first night, and then every night decrease by one. Some explain that the house of Shammai insisted on reflecting on the reality of the decreasing of light throughout the winter*. The house of Hillel says that we light one candle on the first night, and every night increase by one, facing the growing darkness by shining more light.

* Of course this year, Chanukah begins after the Winter solstice, so the nights are already getting shorter!

NIGHT 3

Which is more threatening, internal divisiveness or external attack?

There are several elements to the story of Chanukah. There was internal strife between the Hellenizing Jews, and the Maccabees – those who loved and assimilated the Greek ways of life – and those who believed in traditional ways of observance. At the same time, there was the increasing threat from the Greeks and the rules they placed against Jewish ways of life. While, ultimately, the Jews prevailed, there was great loss along the way.

NIGHT 4

Whose side would you take now?

Some read the Chanukah story as an internal struggle between traditionalists who fought against the globalizing culture of the Greeks, and those who were happy to open themselves up to Hellenism and neglect their Judaism. This was, in one sense, a struggle between modernizing assimilators, and staunch traditionalists. When integration into surrounding society comes at the cost of preserving traditional ways of Jewish life, which side would you take? Assimilation or staunch traditionalism?

NIGHT 5

(When) (How) can holidays from two different faith traditions be celebrated together?

This year, like many years, Christmas and Chanukah overlap. Many families that have both Jewish and Christian family members have taken to celebrating both holidays. While the holidays are both festivals that bring light into the dark of the winter months, their historical and religious significance are completely different, making for a deep celebration of both together challenging for some.

NIGHT 6

When, if ever, is it better to be small and mighty, as opposed to big and mighty?

The story of Chanukah celebrates the victory of the few against the many. Historically, the Jewish people have always been small in number. The early Zionists took inspiration from the Maccabees of the Chanukah story, and saw themselves as the modern-day Maccabees, fighting the masses to establish a Jewish home.

NIGHT 7

Chrismukah, Hanucrismas, or Christmukah?

What does it tell us about the hegemony, when in America the overlap between the two festivals begins with Christmas, while in Israel it begins with Hanukah? And why does America avoid the messianic 't' of Christ?

NIGHT 8

Is it better to look back and see what's been achieved, or is it better to look forward and see what's left to accomplish?

In the Talmud, Shabbat 21a, there is a disagreement about how to light the Chanukah candles. The house of Shammai says that we should light all eight candles on the first night, and then every night decrease by one. The house of Hillel says that we light one candle on the first night, and every night increase by one, looking back at what we've done. The house of Shammai preferred to illuminate the number of days yet to be celebrated. The practice today follows Hillel.