



Introduction: Birkat HaHammah and Hanukkah Intersect

In a wonderful confluence of circumstances, the first night of Hanukkah this year (2008/5769) falls on December 21, the northern hemisphere's winter solstice. It is the longest night of the year, marking a day when the sun's path is as low, as southerly and as scarce in its heavenly trek as it ever is. But it is also at this very moment that the darkening journey halts (sol-stice – sun-stopping). The sun stops, reverses course, and moves upwards and northward toward longer, lengthier hours of light again. The lengthening minutes of sunlight match the increasing number of lights we kindle in our homes.

Three months later, the next significant solar event occurs: the sun reaches its vernal (spring) equinox. While we know that time as March 21, the rabbinic calendar celebrates the equinox on April 8. That is the moment of *Birkat HaHammah*, the blessing we recite once every 28 years, grateful for the creation of the sun.

This year, therefore, we have a keener sense of the quarterly landmarks of the sun's annual journey. Which is why the coincidence of the winter solstice and the first night of Hanukkah is so remarkable, and so appealing.

We offer the following ideas for a special addition to this year's Hanukkah celebration, connecting this moment of the solstice with the moment of the equinox, when we mark the birthday of the sun.



Energy-Aware Hanukkah Celebration:

This year, for the first light, let olive oil light up the night. The Hanukkah story, after all, celebrates the miracle of one little cruse of *pure olive oil* that lasted well beyond its anticipated lifespan. While paraffin and other oils may be fine for other nights, and other years, on this night, this year, light olive oil. Olive trees are sturdy and long-lived. They thrive in the Mediterranean, and throughout the land of Israel. They represent longevity, health, renewal, peace. Two trees in the Galilee have been judged to be 3,000 years old, old enough to have possibly given fruit for the oil in the Temple in Jerusalem.

A vibrant flame floating in a dome is also reminiscent of the sun. As we mark the solstice, we mark our dependence on the sun. Its light gives us vision, warmth, wind, growth, energy. And it does all this while enhancing and not diminishing our world. As we light this first light of Hanukkah, tying us to the *Birkat HaHammah* three months away, we acknowledge the power of the sun, and its ability to readily power the energy needs of our world.

Choose a sturdy bowl – for we are told that the firmament of the heavens, the *raki'a*, was forged like an upside-down bowl, separating the upper waters from the lower waters, and the sun was hung there.

Fill the bowl 2/3 with water. Then pour a thin layer of olive oil on top. (The more oil, the longer the light will burn.) Place a floating wick in the center of the bowl with the bottom part dipping into the film of oil. (If you are handy, you can create a floating wick with string and a cork. For the rest of us, it may be easier to purchase floating wicks. Some websites sell Hanukkah floating wicks (Judaism.com and AJudaica.com) or check with your local sisterhood gift shop or Judaica store.

When lit, the bowl will glow the soft colors of a new sun, floating in the firmament.

Place the bowl near another light (either a paraffin *shamash* with which you may want to light the wick, or an electric bulb), for the Hanukkah light is to be a celebrated light, and not part of the household's standard illumination.

Recite the blessings over the lighting of the light, including the first night's blessing of *sheheheyanu*, thanking God for bringing us to this moment.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

Barukh Ata Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam –
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu
l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of
the Universe, who has sanctified us with the
Divine commandments, and has instructed
us to kindle the light of Hanukkah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

Barukh Ata Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam –
sh'asah nisim la'avoteinu (la'horeinu)
bayimim hahem, bazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of
the Universe, who has made miracles for
our ancestors, in those days, at this time.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהַחַיִּימוֹ וְקִיּוּמָנוּ
וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

Barukh Ata Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam –
sheh'heh'chianu, v'key'e'manu,
v'hih'giyanu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of
the Universe, who has given us life, and
sustained us, and enabled us to reach this
moment.

And then recite the following, in celebration of the lengthening hours of the sun:

*How do we understand the verse: “Who is she that breaks forth like the dawn?”
(Song of Songs 6.10)*

One midrash explains:

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba and Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta were walking early one morning in the valley of Arbel. They saw the first rays of light breaking on the horizon. Rabbi Hiyya turned to Rabbi Shimon and said: “This is the way redemption comes.”

*Rabbi Shimon turned to Rabbi Hiyya and said: “It is written, ‘Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is a light for me.’ (Micah 7.8) At first, the light comes little by little. Then it scatters and brightens, then it multiplies and shines forth, and afterward it is continually exalted.”
(Midrash Tehillim (Buber) Psalm 22.13)*

As redemption came to the Jews in the time of the Maccabees, so may redemption come to the world today. May this be the dawn of a new era of peace, wisdom and energy. May this little flame help us learn how to brighten, and enlighten, the world.

Gift Giving

It has become customary to give gifts on Hanukkah. On this night when we celebrate the miracle of energy and the life-sustaining gift of the sun, let us share our bounty. One option is to purchase solar-cookers for Darfurian women. These women who have already fled their homes, wander the desert for wood scraps to cook – putting their lives and bodies in danger. Donations of solar cookers allow them to access the abundant energy from the sun. To purchase solar cookers for Darfurian women in need, click [here](#).

FOR MORE ON BIRKAT HAHAMMAH, COME VISIT WWW.BLESSTHESUN.ORG