

## Winter Holidays – Vayikra 18:1-4

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם-בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ  
וּבְחַקְתֶּיהֶם לֹא תִלְכוּ:

אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לִלְכֹת בְּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקְתִּי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאֲדָמָה וְתִי בְּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה:

And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying

Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them I am Hashem your God

You should not do like the practices of the land of Egypt in which you dwelt or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws.

My rules alone shall you observe and faithfully follow my laws: I am Hashem your God.

You shall keep my laws and my rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD.

# A discussion on Winter Holidays based on Vayikra 18:1-4

## Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What is the point of putting the two names of God in “I am Hashem your God”?
- Why were Egypt and Canaan specifically chosen to emphasise this point to Jews at the time?
- There are three different types of non-Jewish practice here. What is the difference between them?
- What key piece of information does the translation miss that the Hebrew captures?
- Do you feel like the text is repetitive? What are the repetitions emphasising?

## Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What do you take from Rashi’s and the Rambam’s comment on “and you shall live by them.”
- Why do you think this is emphasised at this point in Vayikra?
- How can these pasukim be applied nowadays?
- Is it a coincidence that Chanukah Coincides with this time of the year?

## Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What do you take from the story of Chanukah?
- How influenced are we by Greek culture today? Is this a good or bad thing? What would the Maccabees say about Bnei Akiva?
- What is your favourite time in the winter holidays?

## Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

### Rabbi Lawrence Keleman:

Many who are excitedly preparing for their Christmas celebrations would prefer not knowing about the holiday’s real significance. If they do know the history, they often object that their celebration has nothing to do with the holiday’s monstrous history and meaning. “We are just having fun.” Imagine that between 1933-45, the Nazi regime celebrated Adolf Hitler’s birthday – April 20 – as a holiday. Imagine that they named the day, “Hitlerday,” and observed the day with feasting, drunkenness, gift-giving, and various pagan practices. Imagine that on that day, Jews were historically subject to perverse tortures and abuse, and that this continued for centuries.

Now, imagine that your great-great-great-grandchildren were about to celebrate Hitlerday. April 20<sup>th</sup> arrived. They had long forgotten about Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen. They had never heard of gas chambers or death marches. They had purchased champagne and caviar, and were about to begin the party, when someone reminded them of the day’s real history and their ancestors’ agony. Imagine that they initially objected, “We aren’t celebrating the Holocaust; we’re just having a little Hitlerday party.” If you could travel forward in time and meet them; if you could say a few words to them, what would you advise them to do on Hitlerday?

### David Brooks:

“I am not a Jew for Jesus but I am definitely a Jew for Christmas. Christmas is one of the best things you Christians have given us, along with mac and cheese, Bono, Croquet and politeness.”

### Eim Habanim Semeicha – Rav Shlomo Teichtal

Jews of exile do not take “tomorrow” into consideration. They lack perception, refusing to learn from the past and fool themselves into thinking their situation in exile will improve in the future.

### Rashi:

Live by them – in the world to come. For if you say it means that he shall live in this world, is it not a fact that in the end he must die?

+ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Foundations of Torah 5:1 – on Kiddush Hashem (live by them, don’t die by them.)

## A Related Story: Christmas comes to a Jewish Home

In December 1978 Jewish writer and novelist Anne Rophie wrote an article in the New York Times called “**Christmas comes to a Jewish Home.**” The article can be found online. Read through it together with the chanichim or have them read it by themselves and ask them what they thought and how it made them feel. I have only not included it here because it’s too long. This first article is by far the most important part of this story. It starts as follows:

*“It seems that every year, just as we are taking our carefully selected Christmas tree off the top of the car and dragging it into the house, the rabbi who lives down the block walks by. I smile sheepishly and my heart begins to pound. Being a Jew who celebrates Christmas, and there are many of us, needs some explanation. Certainly it’s a sign of assimilation, of a generation with dim memories of the ghettos of Russia and Poland. It’s a signal, all right, of religious and ethnic breakdown. It’s a sign that the melting pot is still simmering if not boiling.*

*My grandfather, I was told, would never enter a museum because he felt that there were so many pictures of Jesus on the walls that he would be forced to see the image of the babe in whose name his town was pillaged, his parents killed, his temple burned and he and his sisters driven penniless to a foreign shore. What would he think if he heard his great-grandchildren singing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” in their school assembly?*

*My grandfather, although he died before I was born, before the worst of the atrocities against the Jews occurred, deserves an explanation...”*

The following week The New York Times published an abundance of “Readers Responses” to the article. Some were positive, but most were overwhelmingly negative. Some even compared Rophie to a Nazi and made threats on her life. In 1979, The Jewish Press, a New York based orthodox Newspaper even called for a boycott of the New York Times for printing Rophie’s article which they labelled as anti-Semitic.

Surprisingly, years later in 1992, Rophie published another article which she called “**Taking Down the Christmas Tree.**” In it, she apologised. She stated that she misjudged her readers and her own true feelings about Judaism. She displayed, by her own admission, ignorance about the history of Hanukkah and had naively adopted an assimilationist ideology without thoroughly thinking through the consequences of her attitude. “I hadn’t understood” she wrote “that growing up in the forties, I had absorbed the anti-Semitism of the culture, and that’s why I thought that people who spoke with accents were peculiar, that Jews were outsiders. I wanted to be inside with the others... I didn’t realise that assimilation had a dark side...I now realise that assimilation can produce an identity which is shallow, materialistic, rooted and anxious. Assimilation can deprive a person of the pleasure of belonging and the vitality that comes from real knowledge about and interest in that person’s own community.”

Anne Rophie became a practicing conservative Jew.



## Some Interactive Resources:

**Stand-up Comedy** – Why Jews are better off without trees – Elon Gold

**Children’s book** – “There’s no such thing as a Chanukah Bush” Sandy Goldstein

**Maoz Tzur** – Have a little sing and discuss meaning behind words  
**Research** – Do some group research into the origins of Christmas and New Year’s Day – What you find will be surprising!

**Slam Poetry** – Nissim Black – “The Black Miracle”

**Art** – What does the artist achieve through recolouring this black and white photo? You can find out the background to this photo at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E90yMxAM3YI>