

Bend the Arc Hanukkah Text Study 5783

Each year during Hanukkah, we at Bend the Arc talk about themes of scarcity and abundance, darkness and light, and commit to fighting for our piece of what is possible. In 2014 and 2015, we asked everyone to spread the light of their *hanukkiot* (Hanukkah menorahs) along with the message #BlackLivesMatter and were a part of a group that helped organize #ChanukahAction marches in 15 cities. In 2016, we protested Rep. Lee Zeldin and Steve Bannon and systemic disinvestment in Children's Health Insurance Programs. In 2018, we held a "No Gelt for Trump's Wall" action. We carried on this tradition in 2020 and 2021 with our "Lights of Resistance" — lighting our *hanukkiot* in solidarity for a country free from racism, antisemitism, and white supremacy.



(From left to right: 2021 hanukkah poster, 2017 protest against Rep. Lee Zeldin and Steve Bannon, 2014 hanukkah #BlackLivesMatter campaign)

This Hanukkah is a moment of rededication. As we light our candles, we rededicate ourselves to investing in the future we each deserve and need — a future where Black people are free. Now is the time for transformational change, for divesting our communities from systems and policies that harm Black communities, and ultimately all of us.

The path toward liberation is reflected powerfully in the [BREATHE Act](#), a visionary legislative framework introduced by the Movement for Black Lives in 2020, which calls for the divestment of our taxpayer dollars from brutal and discriminatory policing and invests in a new vision of public safety. This is our collective interest, and the visionary work of Black-led movements offers us a new path forward and new possibilities for ourselves and future generations.

We created this guide to help ground your Hanukkah ritual and support you to have conversations with others about the enclosed Jewish texts, the BREATHE Act, and the possibility offered for our future.

Here is what you will find in this resource. Feel free to choose your own adventure!

- [Begin with a recitation of the Hanukkah blessings](#)
- [Learn more about the BREATHE Act](#)
- [Learn about the *Chevruta* method](#)
- [Text Study #1: Who and What Keeps Us Safe?](#)
- [Text Study #2: 10 things a community needs](#)

Hanukkah Blessings

When we light the Hanukkah candles, we are honoring the story of a miracle — when a small amount of oil, meant to only last one night, lasted for eight nights.

Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai each shared different perspectives about the commemoration of this miracle. Rabbi Hillel suggested we should start with one candle on our *hanukkiah* and then add one more each night. He wanted us to celebrate the expansion of the miracle by growing the light. Rabbi Shammai suggested the opposite, that we should start on the first night with all eight candles lit, and then take one away each night. He wanted us to shrink the light to represent the diminishing oil as the days went on.

Jews all over the world are approaching Hanukkah through these two orientations and practices — a gift that our lineage offers us. This year, we invite you to consider these orientations and light your *hanukkiah* with intention:

➤ **Are you coming from a place of abundance? Can you feel, see, hear, even taste a liberated future? Try lighting your candles as Shammai instructed.** Starting with all candles lit represents the fullness of your vision. Each night's shrinking light can be an opportunity to examine the concrete things that cause harm in your community and the possibility of divestment as a way to actualize liberation. It can be an opportunity to think about your own personal privilege and power. Starting from the vision can help you focus each night on what your community needs to give up to get there.

➤ **Are you focused on the starkness of our current reality but looking ahead to a time when liberation can become real? Follow Hillel's guidance, and light an additional candle each night.** The growing light can help you lean into abundance, visually reinforcing the belief that through investment, by adding a little more day by day, we can arrive at freedom. Before lighting each new candle, you can think about what is missing from your community and what you can do to fill the gaps and build towards the vision.

ברוך אתה, יי אלהינו, מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tsivanu
l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.*

Blessed are You, Source of all light, who hallows us with mitzvot,
commanding us to kindle the Hanukkah lights.

ברוך אתה, יי אלהינו, מלך העולם, שעשה נסים לאבותינו ואמותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, she-asah nisim laavoteinu v'imoteinu
bayamim hahaeim baz'man hazeh.*

Blessed are You, Source of all light, who performed wondrous deeds
for our ancestors in days of old at this season.

For first night only:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵחֵינֵנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higiyanu
laz'man hazeh.*

Blessed are You, Source of all light, who has kept us alive, sustained us,
and brought us to this season.

What is the BREATHE Act:

In honor of the lives of those stolen by police and state-sanctioned violence — Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Natasha McKenna, George Floyd, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Elijah McClain, Pearlie Golden, Kayla Moore, Freddie Gray, Atatiana Jefferson, Oscar Grant, and far too many more — [...] this visionary bill framework divests our taxpayer dollars from brutal and discriminatory policing and invests in a new vision of public safety. This vision answers the call to defund the police and allows all communities to finally BREATHE free.

We are rising up against all the ways that the criminal-legal system has harmed and failed to protect Black communities. The current moment requires a solution that fundamentally shifts how we envision community-care and invest in our society. History is clear that we cannot achieve genuine safety and liberation until we abandon police, prisons, and all punishment paradigms.

We organized, we wrote policy that crystalized our demand, and we elected a new Congress. Now, alongside our allies in Congress, we're introducing state, local, and federal legislation that works to create systems that truly keep Black people safe. We have never stopped organizing to establish our vision for public safety in legislation, tailored by local communities, and advanced through legislation at the federal level.

Source: [BREATHE Act website](#)

There are four sections of the BREATHE Act:

1. **Divest Federal Resources from policing and incarceration & ending federal criminal-legal system harms, including the 1994 Crime Bill and reparations for the War on Drugs**

The BREATHE Act is an invest/divest bill, and Section 1 is the primary “divest” portion of the Act. The Section terminates the federal programs and agencies that have been responsible for driving mass criminalization and incarceration — both in the United States and worldwide. The Section also makes direct changes to shrink, end the abuses of, and decarcerate the federal criminal-legal and immigration systems.

2. **Invest in new approaches to community safety utilizing funding incentives**

Section 2 builds out the infrastructure for a new paradigm of public safety: a non-punitive, non-carceral, prevention-oriented paradigm that will genuinely keep our communities safe.

3. **Allocate new money to build healthy, sustainable & equitable communities for all people**

Section 3 of the BREATHE Act invests funds into specific areas that are proven to ensure all communities may thrive regardless of the racial, immigration status, or economic make up of that

community. Section 3 dreams bigger, acknowledging and repairing the harm of decades of community divestment from non-punitive approaches to safety and wellbeing.

4. Hold officials accountable & enhance self-determination of Black communities.

Section 4 seeks to establish accountability: historical accountability for the U.S. legacy of racial exclusion and violence; political accountability through free and fair elections; and democratic accountability through measures that will enhance accountability for law enforcement.



Jewish Text Study Technologies

From: Dimensions Educational Consulting and Selah Leadership Program

One of the ways that we teach diverse groups to hold each other in beloved community and partnership for justice is to utilize the *Chevruta* method to form study pairs that can accentuate our learning. In each *Chevruta* pair, individuals find additional opportunities to reflect upon ideas shared during sessions and a format for continuing to cull wisdom afterward.

Definition:

- An Aramaic word for fellowship that is also rooted in the Hebrew word for friend “*CHaVeR*.”
- The *Chevruta* method is an encounter. It is a traditional Jewish study method that pairs two people to grapple with an idea or text through discussion and dialogue.

Technique:

- Noisy: The text is always read out loud, and the thinking should occur out loud as well.
- Questions: Questions are more important than answers in the *Chevruta* method. Pairs should generate questions that arise for them through reading the text and then deal with answering them.
- Self-Study: This method of study is not only a way of exploring an idea or a text, but is also a way to explore one’s self. Pairs are encouraged to bring their lived experience and perspectives to the text.
- Some words, phrases, or concepts might be new or unfamiliar, and that is okay!

Theory:

- “BOTH AND”: The *Chevruta* method is based on the assertion that nobody has a complete understanding of any idea. No matter how insightful one is, the knowledge of one will never be greater than the knowledge of many. We depend on others, on their ideas and insights, and especially those ideas and insights that conflict with our own, to move towards “truth” and a more complete understanding of the world around us.

Reflections on Torah, *Chevruta* & Racial Justice:

- “Two are better off than one, in that they derive greater benefit from their efforts. For if they should fall, the one will raise up the other, as opposed to if one falls when there is no one to raise him.” — *Ecclesiastes 4:10-11*
- “Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge everyone favorably.” — *Saying of the Fathers; Pirkei Avot 1:6*
- “One who learns from one’s friend a single chapter, or a single law, or a single verse, or a single expression, or even a single letter, must show him honor.” — *Sayings of the Fathers; Pirkei Avot 6:3*

Text Study #1: Who and What Keeps Us Safe?

Source Sheet by Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein, jcua.org

Chevruta created by Graie Hagans

4. Talmud Yerushalmi, Hagigah 1:7 (6a-b)

(The Talmud Yerushalmi is a collection of comments, rulings, derivations, stories, and analysis responding to and building on the Mishnah, c. 200-c. 400 CE, in the Roman-occupied Land of Israel).

The sages here lived in the 3rd century; R. Yudan was the national Rabbinic leader.

<p>R. Yudan the Nassi sent R. Hiyyah, R. Asi, and R. Ami to travel the cities of the land of Israel so as to appoint teachers of Torah and Mishnah for them. They arrived in one place and couldn't find any teachers of Torah or Mishnah.</p> <p>They said to them [to the city's residents], "Bring us the city's protectors and the city's guards."</p> <p>They [the residents] said to them, "These are our city's protectors." [They responded:] "These are nothing but the city's <i>destroyers</i>!"</p> <p>They [the residents] said to them, "So, then, who are the city's protectors and guards?" They responded, "Teachers of Torah and Mishnah."</p> <p>This is the meaning of that which is written, 'Unless God watches over the city, the watchman keeps watch in vain' (Psalms 127:1).</p>	<p>רבי יודן נשייא שלח לרבי חייה ולר' אסי ולר' אמי למיעבור בקירייתא דארעא דישראל למתקנה לון ספרין ומתניינין. עלין לחד אתר ולא אשכחון לא ספר ולא מתניין.</p> <p>אמרין לון: אייתון לן נטורי קרתא אייתון לון סנטורי קרתא.</p> <p>אמרין לון: אילין אינן נטורי קרתא. לית אילין אלא חרובי קרתא!</p> <p>אמרין לון ומאן אינן נטורי קרתא? אמר לון: ספרייא ומתנייניא.</p> <p>הדא היא דכתיב, "אם ה' לא יבנה בית נשוא עמלו בוניו בו; אם ה' לא ישמר עיר, נשוא שקד שומר" (תהילים קכ"ז:א).</p>
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1. Whom would you identify as the protectors and the guards of you and your loved ones?
2. Whom do you suppose the city's residents brought out to the visiting rabbis and identified as "the city's protectors and the city's guards"? Why do the rabbis say that those "protectors" are actually "destroyers"?
3. This locale has no Jewish educational infrastructure — no "teachers of Torah or Mishnah." What can you learn about its municipal budget priorities? How might you translate this passage to American cities today?

Text Study #2: 10 things a community needs

Source Sheet by Koach Frazier

Chevruta created by Enzi Tanner and Jillian Lipman

Sanhedrin 17b:10

And it is taught in a baraita: **A Torah scholar is not permitted to reside in any city that does not have these ten things: A court that has the authority to flog and punish¹ transgressors; and a charity fund for which monies are collected by two people and distributed by three, as required by *halakha*. This leads to a requirement for another three people in the city. And a synagogue; and a bathhouse; and a public bathroom; a doctor; and a bloodletter; and a scribe [*velavlar*] to write sacred scrolls and necessary documents; and a ritual slaughterer; and a teacher of young children.** With these additional requirements there are a minimum of 120 men who must be residents of the city. They said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: The city must also have **varieties of fruit, because varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes.**²

סנהדרין י"ז ב'

ותניא כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו
אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה בית דין
מכין ועונשין וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים
ומתחלקת בשלשה ובית הכנסת ובית
המרחץ וביהכ"ס רופא ואומן ולבלר (וטבח)
ומלמד תינוקות משום ר' עקיבא אמרו אף
מיני פירא מפני שמיני פירא מאירין את
העינים:

1. How does this text connect with the BREATHE Act?
2. Out of these ten things, which are the top things you would want your city to be investing in?
What are the things a community could divest from and still be a healthy community?
3. Out of these ten things, what are the things your representatives are currently not investing in?
What can you do to make them invest in that?

¹ Torah is replete with corporal punishment issues, and this challenges us in reading and interpreting scripture. For a reading that discusses these matters in Torah, as well as mass incarceration, and restorative justice at length, see Rabbi Aryeh Cohen's "[Doing the Right and the Good: Thinking Against Mass Incarceration](#)," JOE 0.0:1-19. © 2022 Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc.:

² But How Are You Going To Pay For It?": [In Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Gifts for the Poor](#), Chapter 9, a system of progressive tax collection is laid out in detail. A weekly, income-based tax collection for the *kupah*, a public fund that, every Friday, provides adequate sustenance for each of the city's poor to last until the following Friday, is described. There is a positive commandment to give charity and a negative commandment barring refusal to give charity according to your ability. In [Mishneh Torah, Chapter 7](#), flogging is the means by which the court would, by force, "expropriate" the appropriate contribution owed to the public good.