



THE WELLNESS MAMALAH

BY JENNIFER WISE

A Less-Is-More Chanukah

I can only speak for myself (although I'm probably not), but Chanukah totally snuck up on me this year. I've been busy basking in the post-Sukkos glow of having put all the decorations away and all of a sudden: hello, Chanukah. But don't panic, it's okay. I have a Chanukah plan and I'm going to share it with you. It's the same one we've been using the past few years, and I am all about doing the same thing over and over, until it doesn't work anymore.

For the past several years, we have been focusing on experience gifts for our kids, instead of more toys and more things, because we have *all the things*. And we don't *need* all the toys. Getting family members on board has been a process, one that's been ongoing for far longer than I would have liked, but I also recognize that it is not my place to tell others what they may or may not buy for my children. I can only make suggestions and be thankful.

Getting extended family on board with experience gifts isn't easy but if you can manage it, here are some ideas of experiences you might suggest to make the transition easier.

1. Tickets (for the gift giver and the kids) to local children's theater show, or even a Broadway show if the kids are old enough.

2. A family membership to the zoo, aquarium, a science museum, even the local JCC.

3. Passes to the movies, bowling, the arcade, or rock climbing.

4. Lessons – art, sewing, karate, sports, pottery, music, swimming or dance.

5. These are physical gifts that my kids enjoy, but I take solace in the fact that they are not toys: subscriptions to magazines or to sticker clubs, personalized stationary, monthly science or art kits.

I've also found that many of our friends have also been moving towards doing the same with their families, and I took a very informal poll, asking what an experience gift might mean to them,

and it seems many of the ideas have to do with food:

We take the kids out to dinner at a restaurant.

I make up coupons the kids can redeem for ice cream or a doughnut.

We take the kids to see a movie and let them pick whatever they want from the concession stand.

Those are definitely experiences – and ones that I am sure my kids would love to experience as well! But I have been trying so very hard to move away from a food-as-reward outlook on life (it's SO hard; I love jelly donuts). It's slow going, because changing 30-something years' worth of expectations (mine) is a big job, but I feel in my heart that it will be worth it.

When my siblings and I were growing up, my parents gave us each a small gift every night of Chanukah and I've always done the same for my kids, but now that I'd prefer a trip for ice cream not be a gift, I have had to think creatively.

I've used these ideas in years past and they've all been winners:

1. Craft Night.



Let's call this one, *A look back at the year*. Each child received his or her own 16x20 inch frame (think IKEA: inexpensive and colorful) and a bunch of 4x6 pictures from the past year. Kids have the opportunity to create their own year-end collage to hang in their room, full of memories from the past year – birthdays, trips, playdates, and just everyday pictures.

2. Movie Night.

Heat some coconut oil in a pot,

add some unpopped kernels and, once they are all popped, drizzle the popped corn with some melted chocolate (ooh, melted Chanukah gelt!) and sprinkle on some sea salt. Pile onto the couch with the whole family, snuggle under a big blanket and watch (an age-appropriate) movie together. And see? Snacks are cool, especially ones made with healthy oils.

3. Giving is Better than Getting.

One year on Chanukah, I took my kids on a shopping spree in Target. I bought them each a \$30 gift card and let them get anything they wanted. But – there's always a but – these gifts were not for us. We filled our cart with art supplies and board games and stuffed animals and baseball cards and puzzles and hauled our stash over to a children's



hospital a few towns away. We had planned in advance to meet up with our good friends there and together we donated all these fun toys to children who were sick in the hospital. Because of germ issues, we weren't allowed to actually hand the gifts to the children, but because we called in advance, the hospital knew we were coming and they sent down a child-life specialist to meet us in the lobby. She made our two-families' worth of kids feel so special and let the kids pile all the presents into a special toy-transporter that was really just a red wagon. She took pictures with us, shook each of our kid's hands and sent us a thank you note with our group picture attached, making each child feel so special for sharing gifts with the less fortunate.

4. Doughnut-making night.

I know, doughnuts. They're not healthy. But, I also think we can agree that it's not really Chanukah without a jelly doughnut. Doughnuts, however, are less unhealthy when you bake them, and they're tons of fun to make in a mini doughnut maker. You can pick one up for relatively cheap at Target and be on your way to an endless supply of doughnuts – or just a night's worth and then put the doughnut maker away again until next year. Last Chanukah, I added a little extra batter to each dough-

nut section in the doughnut maker so that the doughnuts baked without a hole in the center. We filled them with jelly and sprinkled them with powdered sugar. However, before anyone was allowed to have a doughnut, we sat around the table and used strips of paper to write down two things that we love about each member of our family. And then, while we stuffed our faces with delicious jelly-filled goodness, we read the notes around the table. It sounds super cheesy, but it was really sweet and my kids still talk about it.

5. Inside Joke Gifts.

Almost every family has jokes that only they think are funny, and if you can capitalize on that, your kids will think you are the cleverest mommy ever. Several years ago, as a fun joke, I gave each of my kids the one thing that he (or she) is forever asking me for. I went to Costco and bought a huge pack of Scotch tape, a three pack of Ketchup, a large box of Band-aids and the biggest set of sticky notes I have ever seen. The kids unwrapped their presents, looked at them for a minute and then started laughing. I was able to watch their brains work out the joke, which was priceless – and honestly, they still talk about that night.

Chanukah can be about lots of gifts and toys and more stuff. And if you're cool with that, then more power to you, mama! But I find that I've been craving more organization and less stuff in my life these past few years, and I've found that Chanukah can still be super fun – maybe even more fun – when I take the time to put real thought into each night's activity instead of buying more Lego and more baby dolls, even though I know my kids would love those too. Sometimes the mama's needs have to take precedence and a little thought as to how we can keep all the members of the family happy can go a very long way.

