

Chanukkah

חנוכה

*On the 25th of Kislev are the days of Chanukkah, which are eight... these were appointed a Festival with Hallel [prayers of praise] and thanksgiving.
-Shabbat 21b, Babylonian Talmud*

Chanukkah, the Jewish festival of **rededication**, also known as the **festival of lights**, is an eight day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev.

The story of Chanukah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered Syria, Egypt and Judea, but allowed the people under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this relatively benevolent rule, many Jews assimilated, adopting much of the Hellenistic culture, including the language, customs, and dress.

More than a century later (approximately 165 BC.), a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV was in control of the region. He began to oppress the Jews severely, placing a Hellenistic priest in the Temple, massacring Jews, prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion, and desecrating the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the holy altar. Antiochus not only defiled God's Temple, but he took the title "Epiphanes," which means "God manifested," and demanded to be worshiped. In response to his blasphemous claim to deity, the Jewish people modified his title, calling him "Epimanes" (crazy).

It was a terribly dark period in Israel's history, but God raised up a small band of heroes led by a family known as the Maccabees (Maccabee means "hammer"). They waged a successful rebellion against Antiochus and drove the Syrians out of Israel. The Feast of Hanukkah commemorates the victory God gave the Jewish people over Antiochus and his mighty army. We call the holiday **Chanukkah** (dedication), because the high point of our victory was **rededicating** the Temple in Jerusalem.

Many legends surround this historic event, but the most famous is the "miracle of the oil." It is said that when the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem they immediately set out to rededicate the Temple. But they faced a pressing problem; they needed consecrated oil to rekindle the sacred menorah.

Unfortunately they found only enough for one day—and it would take a full eight days to procure enough oil for Temple use. The thought of lighting the menorah only to see it go out again was heart-wrenching. Yet the zeal to rededicate the Temple was so strong that, despite the dilemma, they decided to light it anyway. A traditional saying arose from this Chanukkah story: "*nes gadol haya sham*," which means, "a great miracle happened there." The great miracle was that the oil, enough for only one day, continued to burn for **eight whole days**, enough time to make and sanctify new oil. According to this legend, this is why we celebrate Chanukkah for eight nights and why the Hanukkiah (Chanukkah menorah) is lit for eight nights as well.

It's a good story, but it isn't mentioned in the earlier accounts of the Maccabbeean revolt, such as 2nd Maccabees. The legend of the oil isn't mentioned until much later, in the Talmud.

Many believe that a more likely reason why we celebrate Hanukkah for eight days is that the Maccabees, upon recapturing Jerusalem, conducted a belated **Feast of Tabernacles** celebration. Remember, Solomon himself had chosen that very same Feast of Tabernacles to dedicate the Temple when it was newly built. So the eight-day festival of joy and thanksgiving would have been an especially appropriate way to commemorate the **rededication** of the Temple.

Traditions

The Menorah

The only religious observance related to the holiday is the lighting of candles.

The candles are arranged in a candelabrum called a **menorah** that holds nine candles: one for each night of Chanukkah, plus a shammus (a servant candle) placed at a different height.

On the first night, one candle is placed at the far right.

The shammus candle is lit and three blessings are recited:

**Baruch Atah Adonai Elohaynu melech ha'olam
asher kid'd-shannu bemitzvotav ve'tzi-vanu lehadlik ner shel Chanukkah**

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us to light the Chanukkah candles.

**Baruch Atah Adonai, Elohaynu melech ha'olam
she'a-sah nisim lavotaynu baya-mim hahaym baz-man hazeh.**

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who performed miracles for our ancestors at this season in ancient days.

**Baruch Atah Adonai, Elohaynu melech ha'olam
she-he-cheyanu v'kiy-manu vehigiyanu laz-man hazeh.**

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who has given us life, sustained us and helped us to reach this day.

Foods

It is traditional to eat **fried foods** on Chanukkah because of the significance of oil to the holiday. Among Jews, this usually includes **latkes** (pronounced "lot-kuhs" or "lot-keys" depending on where your grandmother comes from).

Latkes are grated potatoes fried in very hot oil and served with either apple sauce or sour cream.

Other Customs

Another tradition of the holiday is playing **dreidel**, a gambling game played with a top with four sides. Most people play for matchsticks, pennies, M&Ms or chocolate coins. The traditional explanation of this game is that during the time of Antiochus' oppression, those who wanted to study Torah (illegal at the time) would conceal their activity by playing gambling games with a top whenever an official or inspector was within sight.

A dreidel is marked with four **Hebrew letters**: Nun, Gimel, Hei and Shin. These letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham", **a great miracle happened there**, referring to the miracle of the oil.

The letters also stand for the **Yiddish words** nit (nothing), gantz (all), halb (half) and shtell (put), which are the rules of the game! There are some variations in the way people play the game, but the way many learned it, everyone puts in one coin. A person spins the dreidel. If it lands on Nun, nothing happens; on Gimel (or, as we called it as kids, "gimme!"), you get the whole pot; on Hei, you get half of the pot; and on Shin, you put one in. When the pot is empty, everybody puts one in. Keep playing until one person has everything.

Gift-giving has also become a traditional part of Chanukkah and many exchange gifts on each night of the holiday. Often, the parents give their children small gifts on each night saving a big one for the first and last nights.

Gelt, is money and is often given during Chanukkah.

Also, many stores have foil wrapped chocolate which is molded to look like Israeli coins and these are distributed among the children.

Chanukkah and the Believer

Is Channukah important for believers? Yes, it causes us to remember how God had, once again, preserved and protected the Jewish people from a powerful adversary who sought to pollute their beliefs and destroy their faith in the one true God.

The word Chanukkah means "**dedication**", and just as the Maccabees were zealous to **rededicate** the Temple to God, we too are reminded of the importance of consecrating our "temples" (our bodies) to God and that presenting ourselves in service to Him is the highest calling in life.

Chanukkah, the **Festival of Lights**, should cause us to focus on **Messiah**, who is the **Light of the world** (John 8:12). The menorah in the Temple is a type of Him who was to come, the "true Light, so that those who **believe** will not remain in darkness but have the Light that leads to **eternal life** (John 1:9, 3:17, 12:46, 17:3).