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# Jewish Holidays in a JIFF

The fast and easy way to Cut the Confusion!



## Your Step-by-Step Guide to Celebrating Hanukkah

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**“Not by might and not by power, but by spirit alone...”**

*The Prophet Zacharia*

Although Hanukkah is not considered religious in nature, it is one of the most widely celebrated holidays on the Jewish calendar. While it's a festive time in which giving and receiving gifts has become a popular tradition, Hanukkah's main theme actually centers on the importance of standing up for what you believe in -- even against great odds.

Whether you decide to celebrate this holiday yourself, or just learn a little bit more about it, we hope you will enjoy this step-by-step guide and the tale of a tiny group of resistance fighters who defeated one of the greatest armies in ancient history -- making it possible for Judaism to live on to this day!

# Introduction to Hanukkah

## FAQ's

### **What is Hanukkah?**

Hanukkah (han-oo-kah), also known as the Festival of Lights, is an eight-day holiday celebrating Jewish survival and religious freedom. Although Hanukkah has little religious significance, it is one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays, partly because of its proximity to Christmas, but also because of its uplifting theme of spirit over superior strength. Like David overcoming Goliath, Judah Maccabee and his small army of resistance fighters were victorious in defeating one of the most powerful armies in the ancient world to reclaim the Holy Temple in Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago.

### **What does the word Hanukkah mean?**

Hanukkah, also spelled Chanukah, means "dedication" and refers to the rededication of the Holy Temple after it was desecrated by the Syrian-Greek army.

### **What are the origins of Hanukkah?**

Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah (Five Books of Moses) so while many people believe it has great historic value, it is not considered to be "the word of God." The most significant event of the holiday, the battle between the Maccabees and the Syrian-Greeks, happened several hundred years after the Torah was believed to be given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai. However, it is related to *Macabees*, Books 1 and 2, which were written a century or more after the battle took place. A passage in Maccabees 1 states:

*"For eight days they celebrated the rededication of the alter. Then Judah and his brothers and the entire congregation of Israel decreed that the days of the rededication should be observed every year for eight days. (1 Mac.4:56-59)"*

### **What is the "miracle" of Hanukkah?**

The "miracle" of Hanukkah is said to have occurred when the Maccabees reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem from the Syrian-Greeks. In order to rededicate the Temple, they had to light the ner tamid (nere tamid), Hebrew for eternal light, which was supposed to burn continuously. Although they were only able to find enough oil for it to burn for one day, it ended up lasting for eight, enough time for them to locate more. While this is the story that has been told for many generations, it is believed by some to be a myth that was invented to shift the significance of the holiday from one of a military victory to something more "divine." Please see *The Story of Chanukah* at the end of this guide for more information.

### **When is Hanukkah celebrated?**

Hanukkah begins every year on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar, but is not the same from year to year on the Western calendar. However, it typically falls sometime in November or December.

## **How is Hanukkah celebrated?**

Each family has their own customs around the celebration of Hanukkah. Often, people observe it in any or all of the following ways:

- Lighting the Hanukkah Menorah
- Singing songs and playing games
- Inviting family and friends over for a meal which may include some items fried in oil (please see below for more information)
- Giving gifts to friends and loved ones
- Giving to those in need
- Attending community Hanukkah celebrations

## **What is a Hanukkah Menorah?**

The only religious observance associated with Hanukkah is the lighting of candles. The menorah (men-oh-rah), is the object that holds the candles and is the most widely recognized symbol of Hanukkah. It is a special nine-branched candelabra, in which eight of the branches represent each of the eight nights of Hanukkah. The ninth branch is for the Shamash (Hebrew for "helper") and is the candle used to light the other candles. Hanukkah candles that fit most menorahs can be purchased in the Kosher food aisle of most grocery stores, in Jewish gift shops or online.

## **How is the Menorah lit?**

Traditionally, many people light the candles in the following way, however, you should feel free to do it in whatever way you wish:

Each night of Hanukkah, a candle is placed in the ninth branch of the menorah, which is often higher than the others, located in the center or is set apart from the other branches in some way to help designate that it is the special place for the shamash (sha-mah-sh), or helper candle.

On the first night of Hanukkah, the first candle is placed in a branch on the far right of the menorah. Each night, an additional candle is added and placed from the far right moving toward the left. Once the candles are placed in the menorah, the shamash is lit first and then it is taken out of its holder or branch, and used to light all the other candles beginning from left to right. (please see the back of this guide for prayers and more information).

## **When should the Menorah be lit?**

The menorah is traditionally lit at nightfall. Most people allow the candles to burn down completely, or remain lit for at least 30 minutes after dark. Some people light their menorah(s) near a window with the intent of "publicizing" the miracle of Hanukkah.

## **Who should light the Menorah?**

Lighting the menorah is something every person in the family can do together. In some families, each person lights his or her own menorah.

## **Why do people give gifts on Hanukkah?**

Gift giving is not something that is historically associated with the holiday of Hanukkah. However, money, savings bonds, and small chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil are the modern manifestations of Hanukkah *ogelt,ö* (Yiddish for money).

The First Book of Maccabees relates that some 20 years after the Temple was reclaimed, King, Antiochus VII gave the people of Judah (today what's known as Israel) the right to make their own coins. This was extremely significant in those days. Having the ability to mint their own coins represented true independence for the Jewish people. Hence giving gifts of coins to commemorate this event became a Hanukkah tradition. Later, with the advent of Christmas, this tradition turned into the giving of other kinds of gifts as well.

## **How should gifts be distributed on Hanukkah?**

Each family does it differently. While here are no official rules, the following are ways in which some families distribute gifts, but you can feel free to create your own special gift giving tradition:

- Display all the gifts (on a special table with the menorah or other decorations if you so choose) and allow each person to choose one gift per night (or a designated number of gifts) for each of the nights until the gifts run out.
- Display all the gifts and have a parent(s) choose which gift(s) the child(ren) should open each night, and have the child(ren) choose which gifts the parents should open.
- Allow everyone in the family to open all their gifts on the first night one at a time, alternating one family member after the other until all the gifts are opened.
- Allow everyone in the family to open all their gifts on the first night at the same time.

Some families also have the tradition of setting aside money or gifts for people less fortunate, as part of the Jewish tradition of Tzedakah (Hebrew for righteousness or justice, but most closely associated with the word *öcharityö*).

## **What foods are traditionally eaten on Hanukkah?**

Typically, people eat foods fried in oil to commemorate the *ömiracleö* of the tiny bit of oil that ended up lasting eight days. In America and Europe, the traditional food served on Hanukkah is the latke (lot-kah) or potato pancake, which is a mixture of grated potatoes, onions and eggs fried in oil. Latkas are typically served with sour cream or with homemade applesauce. In Israel, the traditional Hanukkah food is *sufganiyot* (soof-gah-nee-oat) or jelly filled donuts. Please see the back of this guide for recipes.

## **What is the game of Driedle?**

The dreidel (dray-duhl), Yiddish for *öto turnö* is a four-sided top with a Hebrew letter on each side:

**SHIN, HEY, GIMEL, NUN**

Each is the first letter of a word in the Hebrew sentence *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*, which translates to *A Great Miracle Happened There*. Today the dreidle is used to play a game of chance, but some historians believe that something like it was first played by Jews during the time of the Maccabees to cover up their study of Torah when it was outlawed by the Greek King Antiochus.

# How to play the Game of Dreidle

## What you'll need:

- A dreidle (can be purchased in most Jewish gift shops, online or at many local party or home goods stores)
- A sturdy surface or table
- Several dozen tokens such as pennies, buttons, chocolate Hanukkah gelt or other small candies
- Two or more players

## The Object of the Game:

To win all, or the largest portion of, the tokens in the pot

## How to Play:

- An equal amount of tokens are distributed to each player
- Before each round, each person puts a token in the middle
- The youngest player is the first to spin the dreidle and then each time the pot is won, the winner of the pot spins first.
- Play as many rounds as you wish
- Depending on what letter the dreidle lands on, the player will:

**נ** - Nun: Get no tokens from the pot. Lose a turn

**ג** - Gimel: Give a token to the pot

**ה** - Hay: Take half of the tokens from the pot

**ש** - Shin: Take all the tokens from the pot

# The Story of Hanukkah

## **Some background before our story begins...**

The story of Hanukkah dates back more than 2,000 year ago, to the land of Judea (today what's known as Israel), where the Jewish people were ruled by a brutal king named Antiochus (an-tie-oh-cus). He forbid the Jews from practicing monotheism and forced them to convert to paganism and worship Greek gods. The observance of the Shabbat (Sabbath) and other traditions central to Judaism were outlawed, and the sacrifice of pigs and other atrocities were performed in the Holy Temple. To add insult to injury, Antiochus had an idol of the Greek god Zeus erected on the holiest altar in the Temple. While some Jews complied with the new laws and did what they were told, many refused, and still others rebelled

## **The Hebrew Hammers...**

In the foothills of Judea lived a Jew named Mattathias who murdered a Greek official who had tried to force him to worship a pagan god. Shortly after this incident, Mattathias and his five sons formed a group of resistance fighters known as the *Maccabees*, (Hebrew for hammer.) When Mattathias died, his son Judah became the leader of the Maccabees and succeeded in driving Antiochus's armies from Judea for good.

Like other rulers before and after him, Antiochus underestimated the will and strength of the Jews who ended up defeating his huge Syrian-Greek army and reclaiming their Temple. However, it took many years of fighting before the Maccabees were victorious. Finally, in the year 165 BC, after more than 500 years of oppression, the Jews were able to rededicate their Holy Temple and were once again in control of their own destiny.

## **Renovate and Rededicate...**

The first act of business once the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple was to rid it of the presence of pagan gods, pigs and other animals. Once it was purified on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, the Jewish people were eager to observe the belated eight day harvest holiday of Sukkot (Sue-coat) considered to be the most important festival on the Jewish calendar at that time. Just a few months earlier the Jews were forced to hide in the woods to celebrate this holiday, but were now free for the first time in a very long time to observe it in their Holy Temple once again.

## **A well oiled tale...**

Ever since the rededication of the Temple on that first Hanukkah, the Jewish people had celebrated it as a great military victory. However, some 600 years after the Maccabees' victory, the Jews of Babylonia (the place in which the Jews were exiled when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and conquered Jerusalem) invented the story of the "miracle of the oil," which has lasted to this day and goes something like this:

Once the Maccabees cleaned up the Holy Temple and prepared to rededicate it, they discovered there was only one tiny bottle of oil left to light the Ner Tamid (nare tah-meed), Hebrew for eternal light. Although once it was lit it was not supposed to ever be extinguished, there was only enough oil for it to burn for one day. However, by a great miracle, the oil lasted eight days, enough time for more to be brought.

## **Miracle or Myth?**

Some say that the reason the Babylonian Jews made up this story was to downplay the message of the holiday from one of "activism" to one of "passivism," for fear of inciting the wrath of their Babylonian oppressors. And while this story has managed to live on until modern times, the underlying theme of Hanukkah is that a little bit can go a long way!

Whether it be a small army, or a small vessel of oil, both far exceeded expectations in a way that has captured the hearts and minds of Jewish people for hundreds of generations, surely a true cause for celebration in any case!

# Hanukkah

## Step-by-Step

The following is how many people traditionally observe Hanukkah, but you can pick and choose, adapt or recreate as few or as many blessings, rituals and customs from this list as you are comfortable! or you can start your very own! Transliteration for each blessing is provided below, but saying the prayers in English is perfectly acceptable. To hear these prayers being recited, you might consider entering the appropriate key words and doing a youtube search:

**1. Give Tzedakah** (seh-dah-kah) charity - This is a great opportunity to empty your pockets of loose change. Give some to young children, or ask them to give their own. Use the time to talk to them about the importance of giving back.

**2. Light the Candles** ó The following is the way in which Hanukkah candles are *traditionally* lit:

Each night of Hanukkah, a candle is placed in the ninth branch of the menorah, which is often higher than the others, located in the center or is set apart from the other branches in some way to help designate that it is the special place for the shamash (sha-mah-sh), or helper candle.

On the first night of Hanukkah, the first candle is placed in a branch on the far right of the menorah. Each night, an additional candle is added and placed from the far right moving in toward the left. Once the candles are placed in the menorah, the shamash is lit first and then it is taken out of its holder or branch, and used to light all the other candles beginning from left to right.

**3. Say the Blessing over the candles:**

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*  
Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe

*asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu*  
Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us

*l'had'lik neir shel Chanukah. (Amein)*  
to light the lights of Chanukah. (Amen)

**4. Say the Hanukkah Blessing:**

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*  
Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe

*she'asah nisim la'avoteinu bayamim haheim baziman hazeh. (Amein)*  
Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time

**5. Say the Shehecheyanu (sheh-hec-kee-ah-new) on the first night only**

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe

*shehecheyanu v'kiymanu v'higi'anu laz'man hazeh. (Amein)*

who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season (Amen)

**6. Exchange gifts, play the game of dreidle (see instructions above), eat potato latkes, jelly donuts or other foods fried in oil (see recipes at the end of this guide)**



# Hanukkah Recipes

## Jelly Donuts

### What you'll need:

1 ounce yeast  
1 tbsp. sugar  
1 tbsp. water  
1 tbsp. flour  
3 cups flour  
1/4 cup margarine, melted  
Dash of salt  
3 tbsp. sugar  
2 egg yolks  
1 1/4 cups water (room temperature)  
Jelly (strawberry is recommended)  
Oil for frying (canola is recommended)  
Powdered sugar

### How to Make:

**To make the dough:** Combine the first four ingredients in a bowl. Mix well, cover, and wait until it rises. In another bowl, mix 3 cups of flour with the melted margarine, salt, sugar and egg yolks. Combine the yeast mixture with the flour mixture. Slowly add water while stirring. When the batter is smooth, cover the bowl with a towel and let it sit and rise.

**To make the doughnuts:** After the batter has risen, pour it onto a floured surface and roll it out. Use a glass with a small opening to cut out circles of the dough. Place a drop of jelly in the middle of each circle, and then cover with another circle of dough. Make sure that 2 circles attach well to form a closed ball with jelly in the middle. Cover the doughnuts with a towel and let rise.

**To fry the doughnuts:** Heat oil in a deep pot until very hot. Drop the doughnuts into the oil and fry on both sides until brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and sprinkle with powdered sugar.

## **Latkes (Potato Pancakes)**

### **What you'll need:**

2 Large Potatoes

1 Medium Onion

2 Eggs

Cooking oil

Salt & pepper

### **How to Make:**

Grate the potatoes and onion and combine with 2 beaten eggs to hold it all together, add salt and pepper to taste. The resulting mixture will be very wet. Drop serving spoon size blobs into a lightly oiled skillet and flatten them out thin. Fry until brown, then flip to fry the other side. Cooking will take longer than you expect. You can keep the latkes hot in an oven until you're ready to serve them, but it's unlikely you can keep people away from them that long!