

# Hanukkah or Chanukah

Rachael Martin, December, 2018

**A Little History** ~ Unlike many Jewish holidays, Hanukkah (also known as the Festival of Lights) is not mentioned in the Bible although there are many scriptures that mention Jesus being the Light of the world and miracles with oil. The historical events upon which the celebration is based are recorded in Maccabees I and II, two books contained within a later collection of writings known as the Apocrypha. Although Hanukkah is considered a “minor” Jewish festival, today it ranks—along with Passover and Purim—as one of the most beloved Jewish family holidays.

In the year 168 B.C.E., the Syrian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes sent his soldiers to Jerusalem. The Syrians desecrated the Temple, the holiest place for Jews at that time. Antiochus also abolished Judaism, outlawing the observance of Shabbat and the Festivals, as well as circumcision. Altars and idols were set up for the worship of Greek gods and he offered Jews two options: Conversion or Death.

On the 25th day of the Hebrew month of *Kislev* in 168 B.C.E., the Temple was renamed for the Greek god Zeus. A resistance movement—led by a priestly family known as the Hasmoneans, or Maccabees—developed against the cruelty of Antiochus. The head of the family was Mattathias, an elderly man. His son, Judah, became the chief strategist and military leader of the resistance. Though outnumbered, Judah Maccabee and his fighters miraculously won two major battles, routing the Syrians decisively.

Hanukkah, which means “dedication,” is the festival that commemorates the purification and rededication of the Temple following the defilement caused by the Greeks during their occupation of that holy place.

**Today, the holiday reminds Jews to rededicate themselves to stand against forces that would destroy Judaism and to keep alive the flame of Jewish religion, culture, and peoplehood so that it may be passed on to the next generation.**

Originally, the eight-day holiday was intended to parallel the eight-day festival of Sukkot. The Books of the Maccabees made no mention of the legend concerning a small jar of oil that unexpectedly lasted for eight days. Only centuries after the Maccabees’ defeat of the Syrians did the story of the jar of oil—which has come to be a part of Hanukkah—appear in the Talmud.

According to the Talmud, when the Maccabees entered the Temple and began to reclaim it from the Greeks, they immediately relit the *ner tamid* (eternal light), which burned constantly in the Temple. In the Temple, they found a single jar of oil, which was sufficient for only one day.

The messenger who was sent to secure additional oil took eight days to complete his mission, and miraculously, the single jar of oil continued to burn until his return. The rabbis of the Talmud attributed the eight days of Hanukkah to the miracle of this single jar of oil.

The practice of lighting the menorah was common throughout much of the 19th century. North American Jews tended to neglect most of the other traditions and practices associated with the holiday but by the 1920s, Jews increasingly added gift-giving to their Hanukkah celebrations.

Although Hanukkah had become an important holiday among North American Jews by the 1920s, it would be incorrect to regard it as an imitation of Christmas with an emphasis on the exchange of presents. Rather, North American Jews use this holiday as a celebration of family, reinforcing Jewish identity in a place whose population may be overwhelmingly Christian but in which Jews feel at home. Hanukkah, therefore, is a means for North American Jews to feel a kinship with their neighbors, while simultaneously asserting their Jewish distinctiveness.

**The Dreidel Game** – We get excited about this game... although, we only play with pennies, it's still very fun to play, to spin the dreidel, to understand just a little of the Hebrew language in our house is delightful to us and we enjoy making it a part of our 'being grafted into the lineage of our Savior and King, a Jew, Jesus Christ our Lord.'



A dreidel is marked with four Hebrew letters, which are the rules for the game:

Nun (Yiddish for Nit, or nothing)

Gimel (Gantz, or all)

Hei (Halb, or half)

Shin (Shtell, or put)

These letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham", a great miracle happened there, referring to the miracle of the oil.

There are some variations in the way people play the game, but the way I 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. Then re-divide it, because nobody likes a poor loser!

## The Menorah or Hanukkiah -

Each night, one person lights one candle on the Menorah or Hanukkiah using the “lead candle, or the Shamash” from left to right and then we recite the blessings.

The first is a blessing over the candles themselves. The second blessing expresses thanks for the miracle of deliverance. A third blessing—the *Shehecheyanu* prayer, marking all joyous occasions in Jewish life—is recited only on the first night.



There you have it – a short lesson in the beautiful celebration of Hanukkah and a small part of our believing that God is still a miracle working God – that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever and that Jesus is the Light of the world and He is the Oil we need to keep burning with love and passion for Him and towards the many who don’t know Him yet.

May you be richly blessed with a light burning in your spirit and in your homes this Hanukkah season and always.

Feel free to come back each day this week for the lighting of the Menorah and a prayer.

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Research taken from google, the world-wide web and

<http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/prayers-blessings/hanukkah-blessings>

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