

HANUKKAH:

Jewish festival of light and freedom

Hanukkah (also spelled Chanukah), the Festival of Lights (also known as the Feast of Dedication) is celebrated for eight days to commemorate a victory for religious freedom and the rededication of the Temple in 165 BCE, and to celebrate the power of God and the faithfulness of Israel. Hanukkah is always on the 25th day of Kislev in the Hebrew calendar; **in 2022 Hanukkah is observed from sundown on December 18 until sundown on December 26.**

In ancient times, a Greek general known as Alexander the Great conquered lands around the Mediterranean Sea. Alexander and the leaders who came after him made sure that throughout the empire, people learned to speak and read Greek, wear Greek clothes, take Greek names, and worship Greek gods. In Judea — which was all that remained of the ancient kingdom of Israel — some Jews liked the idea of becoming Greek. Others felt differently. They didn't want to act like Greeks. They wanted to live and worship in Jewish ways.

When King Antiochus of Syria became the ruler of Judea, he decided to destroy the Jewish religion. He set up altars to the Greek idols in every town and ordered all Jews to worship them. Anyone caught studying or teaching the Torah or even keeping Shabbat was to be put to death.



Matityahu and Judah the Maccabee

In the little town of Modi'in, an old priest named Matityahu refused to worship the Greek gods. Since his defiance put him in danger, Matityahu fled to the mountains with his five sons. "Let all who want to obey the Torah and keep God's commandments follow me," he declared. Some brave Jews joined Matityahu. This little group became an army in hiding.

When Matityahu died, his son Judah, who was called Judah the Maccabee, became the leader of the band. For three years, the Maccabees fought on, forcing the mighty army they faced farther and farther back. Finally, they staged a surprise attack on Jerusalem, drove off the opposing troops, and recaptured their capital.

Rededicating the Temple

Judah and his triumphant army marched to the Holy Temple, the Beit Hamikdash. They cleared the Temple and brought back the Torah and all the holy objects. Now they were ready to rededicate the Beit Hamikdash. The Hebrew word for dedication is Hanukkah. This was the first Hanukkah.

The Legend of the Oil

A legend tells that Judah and his followers could not find enough sanctified oil to keep the menorah burning. Only one tiny bottle of oil was left in the storerooms, enough to last about one day. It would take many days for more oil to arrive.

Then an amazing thing happened. Although there was hardly any oil in the menorah, its flames did not go out. On they burned—for two nights, three nights, four nights — eight nights in all. By the eighth night, more oil had arrived. The menorah was refilled, and it continued to burn. Like the spirit and faith of the Maccabees, its light did not once go out.



Lighting the Menorah

The Hanukkah menorah is a special candleholder, used only on this holiday: a hanukkiyah, in Hebrew. It has spaces for eight candles, which stand for the eight nights tradition says the oil burned on the first Hanukkah. And it has a separate space for a ninth candle, the shammash. Shammash means “servant” or “helper”. The shammash is used to light the other candles.

According to the tradition, the menorah in the temple illuminated the whole world. Therefore, King Solomon built the temple’s windows wide on the

inside and narrow on the outside (the opposite of medieval castles, which tried to capture as much outside sunlight as possible), for the temple’s windows did not convey light into the temple but rather were a source of light to the outside world. This is the light of our menorah.

Special blessings are recited when the menorah is lit, to honor this miracle of eight days of light provided by the oil in the temple.

On Hanukkah, a dreidel, a four-sided top with a Hebrew letter on each side, is spun. Playing the dreidel game is not only fun... it also has a deeper meaning. The Hebrew letters inscribed on a dreidel are a Nun, Gimel, Hey or Chai, and Shin. The letters form an acronym for the Hebrew saying Nes Gadol Hayah Sham, which can be translated to “a great miracle happened there,” referring to the miracle in the temple.

Those observing Hanukkah also commemorate the miracle by eating foods cooked with olive oil, such as potato pancakes (latkes)!