



InterfaithFamily.com

Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

GUIDE TO HANUKKAH FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

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What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is a holiday that commemorates the Jewish recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE. It's celebrated for eight days and usually falls in December. The traditional observances of Hanukkah are lighting a menorah, or ceremonial candelabra, spinning a top called a dreidel and eating fried foods. Though it is religiously minor, Hanukkah is a popular holiday. It's a happy festival in the winter, so it provides what seems to be a universally needed break from the dark and cold. It's a holiday about Jews winning a war, which is not the usual subject for a Jewish holiday. The third reason is obvious: for Jews in Christian culture, Hanukkah is the closest Jewish holiday to Christmas.

The Historical Roots of Hanukkah

The story of Hanukkah is a story of a revolution in the service of religious freedom.

When Alexander the Great died, he left behind two successor generals: Seluces, based in Syria, and Ptolemy, based in Egypt. Both were Hellenizers, like Alexander, spreading Greek culture. Alexander had been understanding of the Jewish need for distinctiveness, but the Selucid rulers were intent on exploiting the resources of the land of Israel, which lay on their path to every battle with the Egyptian kingdom. They began interfering with the political and religious life of the Jews, allowing members of the priestly class who were not in the line of succession to buy the high priesthood in exchange for monies from the Temple treasury. The Jews rioted in response to these moves. Finally these interferences culminated in the Selucid king Antiochus IV declaring an outright ban on Jewish practice.

The ban led to scenes of high drama: Selucid soldiers forcing Jews to eat pork, violate the Sabbath and sacrifice to Greek gods. The Hasmoneans, a family from the priestly class in the small town of Modi'in, became the leaders of a guerilla force rebelling against the imposition of polytheism on the Jews. The family included father Mattathias and his sons Judah Maccabee, Simon, Johanan, Elazar, and Jonathan. We have no idea what Maccabee really meant, but today many translate the word as "hammer."

In 164 B.C.E., three years into their 25-year rebellion against the Selucids, the Hasmoneans succeeded in recapturing the Temple in Jerusalem. Judah, the eldest son of the family, was responsible for the recapture of the city and the ritual purification of the Temple. The word Hanukkah means dedication, because the Temple had to be rededicated to Jewish worship. The rebellion continued until 142 B.C.E, when Simon, the second brother, became the first king and high priest in the Hasmonean dynasty and declared the country's independence.

It was important to the Hasmoneans to maintain a connection with their origin as preservers of Judaism in the face of an outside force because during most of their reign they were in conflict with religious Jews. The Pharisees or Sages, ideological precursors to the rabbis who wrote the Talmud, opposed the Hasmoneans for a variety of reasons, but mainly because they saw them as Hellenists themselves who didn't understand Jewish law. One thing that the rabbis deplored was that the Hasmoneans forcibly converted other people--the Idumeans, on the border of Jewish territory in the Land of Israel--to Judaism. They were the only Jews in the entire history of the Jewish people to ever do this. The Hasmonean dynasty also consolidated the power of the monarchy and

the priesthood in a single figure, and the Sages didn't like that either. Conflicts inside the country were bitter.

Creating Hanukkah as a holiday was part of an overall propaganda campaign that the Hasmoneans undertook to show themselves as true inheritors to the ancient biblical kings of Israel. We have archeological evidence of this: their coins did not have human figures on them, as a way to show that they were opposed to idolatry. The Hasmoneans also commissioned the books of the Maccabees, which they intended to become like the books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible.

The Rabbis, as successors to the Sages, fought back against the establishment of Hanukkah by not admitting the books of the Maccabees and the book of Judith into the Jewish canon of the Bible. These books appear in some versions of the Christian canon, sometimes as Apocrypha. The rabbis also downplayed the role of the Hasmoneans in the story of Hanukkah by perpetuating the story of the miracle of the oil, which appears in the Talmud. In this story, familiar to modern Jews, the real significance of Hanukkah was a divine intervention that validated the faith of the rededicators by stretching their single day's worth of sanctified olive oil into eight days of light in the Temple's menorah.

In spite of rabbinic reluctance, Hanukkah took hold as a permanent part of the Jewish calendar. In a dark and cold time of year, people like festivals. Hanukkah has seen real popularity in modern times.

When is Hanukkah, and How Should I Spell It?

Hanukkah is the 25th of Kislev, which is the third month in the Jewish calendar. That's why people speak of Hanukkah coinciding with Christmas: the Jewish calendar and the secular or Gregorian calendar do not overlap precisely. The secular calendar is a solar calendar, so that important dates always fall in the same season of the year. The Jewish calendar is both lunar and solar, so that holidays will fall both at the same phase of the moon and at the same season. The problem with both calendars is that it's hard to have months the right length for moon phases coinciding with four seasons, each three months long. In order for the Gregorian calendar to work, there is a leap year every four years in which February gets an extra day. In order for the Hebrew calendar to work, there is a leap year every seven years in which one whole month gets doubled.

Hence the problem of when Hanukkah falls in relation to Christmas. Because Hanukkah has taken a prominent place in North American secular culture as Jews have become more visible, many secular calendars that don't list more religiously significant holidays will print the dates of Hanukkah. If yours doesn't, try www.hebcal.com.

If you think the explanation of the calendar was complicated, wait until you hear about spelling. Hanukkah does not have a single spelling in English. That's because the English is the transliteration of a Hebrew word that starts with a consonant that has no full equivalent in English. It's a heavy h sound, like the ch in Loch Ness or the x in the Spanish pronunciation of Mexico. Some have tried to write this Chanukah, or Chanuka, but sometimes that makes people think it should be Cheerful Chanukah. If you can't make that throat-clearing first consonant, so useful in Hebrew, German, Dutch and Spanish, have a heart and a Happy Hanukkah. Don't feel bad if the variations in spelling drive you crazy--it's part of the experience.

Symbols and Observances of Hanukkah

Hanukkah, unlike more major Jewish holidays, does not require any days off from work, any major preparation or any long worship services. It is an eight-day holiday that consists mainly of lighting candles, singing songs, eating traditional foods and playing a traditional game.

The Hanukkah Menorah

Hanukkah's sole mandatory religious observance is lighting the Hanukkah menorah or lamp, also called the Hanukkiah.

The menorah has receptacles for nine candles, one for each of the eight nights of the holiday, and one helper candle, the shamash, to light the others. Each night of Hanukkah, there is a protocol for lighting the candles. On the first night, the person lighting recites three blessings: a blessing on the miracles that God did for our ancestors, one on the commandment to light the Hanukkah candles and the blessing on reaching a happy occasion, called Shehecheyanu. Then the person lighting lights the shamash, and then uses the shamash to light the first candle on the far right of the menorah.

On the succeeding nights the routine is similar, except that one only recites the first two blessings--the Shehecheyanu is just for the first time one does something in a particular year. On the second night, there are two candles in addition to the shamash: one on the farthest right position, and one more to the left of that. Each night the people lighting add another candle to the left, lighting the candle in the new position first and then the candles that represent the previous nights. By the eighth night, the lamp is blazing away with nine candles. In a family where each member has his or her own menorah, or at a Hanukkah party where a group lights theirs together, this can be a fun, if slightly pyromaniacal, religious practice. (To read the English transliteration of the blessings, and hear the blessings recited, see [Blessings on the Menorah](#) on Chabad.org.)

Children can be involved in this practice in many ways, even before they are old enough to safely light candles on their own. Children can make their own Hanukkah menorah; there are many versions of this craft project. In some families the children pick the colors of the candles. Older children can light the candles with close supervision.

Some Hanukkah menorahs have places for oil candles instead of wax ones. These generally have small glass globes. To light them, the person lighting needs to buy specially made wicks. Though regular olive oil will work in an oil menorah, it's probably safer and more aesthetically pleasing to use the colored oil that Judaica shops sell with these lamps. Some families prefer candles because then they can select very pretty colored ones or beeswax candles.

Once they have lit the candles some observant Jews don't do any work, observing a miniature Shabbat for the length of time it takes for the candles to burn. Some families have the custom of singing Hanukkah songs after the candles are lit. It's nice to sit and contemplate the candles in silence, too. The traditional custom is not to make use of the candles for anything work-related, just to look at them. It's also a custom to place the menorah in a window in order to publicize the miracle to passersby.

Dreidel

The dreidel is a four-sided top with the Hebrew letters nun, gimel, hey and shin on it, one letter to a side. The origins of the dreidel are shrouded in mystery, which is awfully elevated for something that's a children's toy. Though there are nice stories about how the Maccabees played dreidel, the game probably stems from a medieval German and Irish gambling game popular at medieval Christmases before Christmas got all formal and cleaned up. In any case, it's a fun game that Ashkenazi Jews play at Hanukkah. There are even songs in Hebrew, English and Yiddish about the dreidel.

One facet of Jewish life that seems in perpetual disagreement is how to play dreidel. Everyone knows that there is a pot of coins (usually the chocolate, foil-wrapped kind) or buttons, or another gambling token, and everyone knows that each player spins and has to do something depending on what comes up on the dreidel. The question is, which Yiddish words do the Hebrew letters on the top represent? If the top lands on the letter gimel on your spin, does that mean you get the whole pot because gimel stands for the Yiddish word "ganze" ("all")? Or do you get nothing, because it stands for the Yiddish word "gornisht" ("nothing")? This year, when people start arguing, you can turn to the Internet for answers. According to David Golinkin, who wrote about the dreidel in *A Different Light: The Hanukkah Book of Celebration*, these are the rules: when you get the gimel, you get the whole pot, the hey, you get half, the shin, you put in one piece and the nun, you get nothing. (For images of the four letters, see the [entry on dreidel](#) on Wikipedia.)

People who grew up Jewish have sometimes had lots of experience spinning a dreidel, but it's not hard to learn to do. If you're a non-Jewish partner in an interfaith relationship and haven't already mastered the skill, it only takes a little practice and soon you too can be a dreidel shark. If you want to amaze your Jewish relatives with an obscure practice, learn how to spin the dreidel on its stem, upside down. The wooden dreidels work the best for this.

Just have fun and try not to eat all the chocolate before the end of the game.

Traditional Foods of Hanukkah

Because of the miracle of the oil, it's a Jewish tradition to eat fried foods on Hanukkah. The best beloved of these foods among North American Jews is the potato pancake, called a latke. We at InterfaithFamily.com are not culinary purists who insist that latkes must only be made of grated potatoes, eggs and onions and fried in lots of oil. It's fine with us if you try baking them on a non-stick pan, making them out of zucchini and sweet potatoes or making them vegan and adding grated beets. You can find [many variations](#) and there is no reason not to enjoy them all. We have recipes for [classic versions](#) of the traditional [latke recipe](#) on our website.

You can buy a mix to make latkes or get frozen pre-made latkes. Nothing bad will happen [if you don't make them from scratch](#). It is good to keep in mind that if your relatives keep kosher, you shouldn't serve the latkes with sour cream at a meat meal, because people who keep kosher don't mix dairy ingredients and meat ingredients in the same meal. You can serve them with applesauce at a kosher meat meal; that's a traditional topping. Rumor has it they are good with other, less traditional toppings, like cranberry sauce, salsa or lingonberry preserves. Enjoy yourself and make it your own.

Jews whose families didn't come from Eastern Europe eat other fried goodies on Hanukkah. According to Claudia Roden, author of *The Book of Jewish Food*, among Sephardim it was the custom to have fritters in syrup called bimuelos or zalabia. In Israel, Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions blended to form the custom of eating jelly doughnuts, sufganiot, on Hanukkah. There's nothing symbolically significant about the jelly in the doughnut--for whatever reason, Israelis like jelly.

Another thing that North American Jews eat at Hanukkah is chocolate Hanukkah gelt. These are the chocolate coins wrapped in gold or silver foil that you can use for gambling when you play your dreidel game. They are also fun for children who like to play pirate treasure.

Christmas, Hanukkah and the Interfaith Family: Some Alternatives

Every Jewish person in North America, whether or not they are married to someone who celebrates Christmas, faces a dilemma about Christmas. How much can Jews throw themselves into Christmas without losing a sense of Jewish identity? Every Jew has made a different decision about this, and this decision doesn't necessarily depend on how religiously observant they are. Some look forward with glee to enjoying their neighbor's customs vicariously, touring neighborhoods to enjoy the pretty lights. Some feel encroached upon and grumpy. Some celebrate Christmas along with everyone else who is doing it in a secular way.

Once you have children, Christmas is really a big deal. The whole world around American children is going mad for Santa Claus, Christmas trees and presents. Strangers may approach your child on the street and sweetly wish them a nice visit from Santa, or ask what they want Santa to bring them. Public schools aren't supposed to put on Christmas-themed concerts, but they do.

Though the character of Christmas has changed significantly in modern times, Christmas has never been, forgive the expression, a small potatoes holiday like Hanukkah. As Jews are increasingly accepted into the mainstream of majority-Christian cultures, and marry into Christian families, there is no avoiding the primacy of Christmas.

The families who use InterfaithFamily.com take a variety of approaches to Christmas. Some of the Jewish partners on the site like Christmas just fine and don't feel the slightest awkwardness at participating in celebrating it. Others feel very uncomfortable about having Christmas in their homes, even though they are crazy in love with their spouses who grew up with Christmas. This is another one of those issues that require good communication, since there's such a wide variety of possible reactions that an individual might have.

Some ways interfaith families cope:

1. Celebrate Both Holidays In Your House

In some interfaith households, there are decorations up for Christmas and Hanukkah. The family lights Hanukkah candles and spins the dreidel and also has a tree and stockings. For a lot of families, this works well. Doing both is a way to show that they value both parents' traditions. Some families have a Christmas area and a Hanukkah area, while other families just divide the time, not the space.

Some in the organized Jewish community do not like this solution and say that interfaith families aren't successful in passing on Jewish identity to children specifically because they have Christmas trees. But we at InterfaithFamily.com have done many annual December holiday surveys that very consistently report that many interfaith families who are raising their children Jewish participate in Christmas celebrations in a non-religious, secular way and have Christmas trees in their own homes that do not confuse their children about their Jewish identity. There is not any conclusive research to tell us what effect Christmas trees in the home have on Jewish identity, especially in homes where people also light Shabbat candles every week.

Perhaps a bigger challenge for interfaith families is that some Jewish partners may not feel comfortable having a Christmas tree in their homes. Also, some members of your extended family may feel uncomfortable celebrating Hanukkah in the presence of Christmas decorations, and some might feel weird about Hanukkah. This is the kind of compromise that calls for checking in and communicating your feelings.

2. Celebrate Hanukkah at Home and Visit Christmas

For families raising Jewish children, having Hanukkah at home and visiting relatives for Christmas can be a good way to cope. Just as one would be happy with someone else on his birthday, a Jewish family can visit their friends or relatives who are celebrating their holiday and be happy with them. Christmas is a time of intense cultural creativity: special foods and customs, songs and decorations.

3. Do Christmas-Flavored Hanukkah or Hanukkah-Flavored Christmas

Some Christian families want to include and integrate Hanukkah into their Christmas celebrations, just like they want to include and integrate their Jewish relatives and friends. Some Jewish families want their children to have all the goodies of Christmas, without Christmas. You can already see some of this in any store that sells holiday or party decorations, in the form of large paper Hanukkah-themed ornaments and decorations for your house.

Sometimes these generous impulses lead to some weird syncretism, like the Hanukkah bush and Hanukkah Harry as substitutions for the Christmas tree and Santa Claus. (Hanukkah Harry was the joking creation of comedian Jon Lovitz on Saturday Night Live, and it's quite strange to see signs up advertising opportunities for children to have their photos taken with him.)

Christian relatives may acquire Jewish-themed Christmas ornaments or Hanukkah decorations to add to the festive feeling in their houses, or they may want to serve latkes with their Christmas goose.

If everyone in the family is comfortable playing dreidel for candy canes under the Christmas tree, then this approach will work. Check in with everyone to make sure that they feel respected by attempts to blend holiday customs. In InterfaithFamily.com's annual surveys, the great majority of respondents who are raising their children as Jews report that they strive to keep their holiday celebrations separate and avoid blending them. This has been consistent even in years when Christmas falls during Hanukkah, and in the face of new phenomena like "Chrismukkah." Don't make any assumptions about what will make your relatives more comfortable--ask.

4. Traditional American Jewish Christmas: Chinese Food, Movies and Volunteering

A lot of American Jews joke about spending Christmas eating Chinese food and going to the movies. If you are an interfaith family that has decided not to celebrate Christmas at all, that's always an option. It's a lot of fun to hang out with people who aren't celebrating the holiday, either out in public at a movie theater or restaurant, or at home in front of the DVD player.

In some Jewish families, Christmas is a time to volunteer. Jewish healthcare providers have a long history of taking the shifts of Christian coworkers in order to give them time off with their families. It's also a good time to volunteer on the crisis hotline if you are trained to do that. Christmas is also a time when people who are ill or disabled need extra help, since their usual helpers may be taking the day off to be with their families, so even if you don't have special training, you can help.

You may be able to find volunteering opportunities at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. This has become a popular Christmas activity among Christians and non-religious people as well as Jews, so it may take some effort to find a place that actually needs volunteers if you live in a major city.

Whatever you decide to do on these holidays, we hope you have a lovely time.