Hanukkah

interfaithfamily
Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life
Hanukkah is one of the most home-based and family-centered of the Jewish holidays. A child’s delight, it can be full of gift-giving, games, parties, and good food. Based on an historical event in post-biblical times, it is a minor holiday whose impact exceeds its status because of the need to party in the midst of the coldest and darkest season of the year.

Ancient peoples of all cultures would worry, in the middle of winter, that the sun might never return. Many who believed in gods and goddesses controlling the coming of spring thought it was a good idea to honor those gods and goddesses with a festival in an attempt to encourage the sun’s return. Hanukkah does take place around the time of the winter solstice, but instead of honoring the sun god it celebrates spiritual rebirth during the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the second century B.C.E. (before the Common Era), King Antiochus Epiphanies of Syria ruled the land of Israel as part of the Greek empire. He demanded that every subject under his rule worship the Greek gods. Other peoples obeyed, but the Jews would not. In response, King Antiochus wanted all the Jewish men to attend gymnasium to learn Greek plays, study Greek culture and to aspire to physical beauty, one of the highest Greek values. To make sure that Jews gave up their mistaken ideas, including religious values and practices that did not match the Greek’s, he ordered that the holy Temple of the Jews be used for pagan practices and the worship of Zeus. Pigs were sacrificed there in a further attempt to destroy the spiritual center of the Jewish people. Some Jews willingly took on Greek names, Greek styles of dress and even surgically altered their circumcisions to achieve the Greek standard of male beauty. Most did what was needed to avoid punishment by the Greek authorities but kept Judaism in their hearts.

One family, the Hasmoneans, Mattathias and his five sons, wanted to retake the Temple and prevent the Syrians from controlling their country. They sent a message far and wide: “Let all who choose God, follow me!” They called themselves the Maccabees, taken from the Hebrew word for “hammers.” In the beginning, they were only a small group living in caves, but recruits came from each small town and as their numbers grew so did their power. The revolt reached its climax when Antiochus prohibited circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the study of Torah. Their rebellion lasted three years. When the Syrian forces finally withdrew, the Maccabees quickly destroyed the Greek statues and cleaned the halls and courtyards of the Temple. They rededicated the Temple to God and the Jewish people. That is how Hanukkah got its name, for Hanukkah means “dedication” in Hebrew.
Why Eight Candles?

Hanukkah differs from other holidays in the Jewish calendar because it celebrates the role of human beings, rather than God. Several hundred years later, the rabbis of the Talmud, a central text of Judaism, were worried that celebrating a military victory would encourage risk-taking by Jews in their own time. So the rabbis turned the focus of the story to divine intervention and a miracle: when the Jews began to clean the Temple, they found only one vial, one day’s worth, of consecrated oil for the eternal lamp (ner tamid in Hebrew) which is meant to never go out. It would take a week to produce more oil, but they lit the lamp with the one vial. That one vial of oil miraculously burned for eight days and eight nights. The flame only went out when the new oil was ready. That is why the Hanukkah blessings refer to the great miracle that happened there.

Lighting candles on Hanukkah is a way of expressing our continual desire for light and miracles. The eight-branched candleholder is a symbol of the holiday. It has two names: “menorah,” which could refer to any candleholder with any number of candles; and “hanukkiah,” the special candleholder with room for nine candles, used only on Hanukkah. It is customary to place the Hanukkah menorah or hanukkiah in the window so that the burning candles can proclaim the miracle of Hanukkah to all who pass by our homes.

You may light one hanukkiah or several, anytime after sunset. (On erev Shabbat, Friday evening: light the Hanukkah candles before the Shabbat candles. On Saturday evening, light them after the close of Shabbat.)

Begin by lighting the helper candle, called the “shamash,” that is always set apart from the rest. It is used to light the other candles. On the first night, light the shamash and use its flame to light the first candle on the far right side of the hanukkiah. Add one candle each night, filling the hanukkiah from right to left, but always kindle the newest candle first so that you are lighting them from left to right.

The Hanukkah Blessings:

There are two blessings to sing as you light the candles. The first is over the candles themselves and the second honors the miracle.

Blessed, are You, Eternal One, who worked miracles for our ancestors in days of old, at this season.

[A traditional translation.]
On the first night of the holiday, we add an additional blessing: the Sheheheyanu. It is also said on other holidays which have “firsts,” and on other new occasions.

Blessed be the Eternal One, Source of Life, Who has given us life, helped us to grow, and enabled us to reach this moment.

[An alternative translation from How to Raise a Jewish Child]

Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive and sustained us and permitted us to reach this moment.

[A traditional translation from The Jewish Catalogue]

In America, due to the abundance of Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Central and Eastern European descent), the traditional Hanukkah food is potato pancakes, called “latkes” in Yiddish. It is said that they are eaten because they are fried in oil which reminds us of the miracle. Modern cooks now make these pancakes out of sweet potatoes, zucchini or other vegetables just as in the past, before the potato was introduced to Eastern Europe.

In Israel, the traditional food is doughnuts, called “sufganiot” in Hebrew, which are also fried in oil. After being fried, they are filled with custard or jelly and topped with powdered sugar.

Holiday cookies in the shape of dreidels, Jewish stars or hanukkiahs, dusted with blue frosting or sprinkles, are a modern American addition. Perhaps you will create your own traditional food!

According to legend, the Jews of the Maccabees’ time would mask their study by playing with a spinning top, a popular gambling device. If Syrian-Greek soldiers burst into the forbidden study groups, the troops would see a den of gamblers instead of agroup of lawbreaking scholars.

The modern dreidel, from the German dreihen (to spin) is a Jewish version of a German gambling game. Each of the four sides has a Hebrew letter indicating one word of the saying “a great miracle happened there” – “nes gadol hayah sham.” Each player puts their bet of money, or a substitute like nuts or raisins, into the middle (the pot) and spins the dreidel in turn. The letter that lands facing up indicates what the player is to do. The “Nun” stands for the Yiddish word “nisht,” and tells the player to do “nothing.” “Gimmel” stands for “gants,” which is Yiddish for “all,” so the spinner takes the whole pot. “Hey” stands for “halb” and the spinner takes “half” the pot. “Shin” stands for “shteln,” “put” and the spinner has to put one coin or nut into the pot.

In the 18th century it became customary to give children coins to give to their teachers; later they received a few coins for themselves. This has evolved into giving chocolate coins or gelt (Yiddish for “money”) to children, which in turn evolved into an exchange of gifts. Some Jewish families resist the impulse to shower their children with toys and have developed traditions of giving toys to charity, working one night in a soup kitchen or encouraging children to be the givers of homemade gifts to each other.

New customs evolve with each new generation. Repeat the traditions that appeal to you and add your own new variations on the themes of Hanukkah: bringing light into dark places and renewing your dedication to teaching and living meaningfully.
InterfaithFamily’s mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships—individuals, couples, families and their children—to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

InterfaithFamily offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

You can join the InterfaithFamily Network or signup for our email newsletter at www.interfaithfamily.com

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