



www.modernDallas.net/moa8x8.html

Hanukkah

interfaithfamily

Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

Hanukkah

What Is The Story Of Hanukkah?



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 “*hanukkiyah*,” the special candleholder with room for nine candles, used only on Hanukkah. It is customary to place the Hanukkah menorah or *hanukkiyah* 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 *hanukkiyah* 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 *hanukkiyah*. Add one candle each night, filling the *hanukkiyah* 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.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
A-SHER KID'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV
VITZ-I-VA-NU
L'HAD'LIK NER SHEL CHA-NU-KAH.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe, by Whose
mitzvot we are hallowed;
Who commands us to kindle the
Hanukkah lights.

[A traditional translation.]

Blessed, are You, the Source of Life,
who has sanctified us
through Your mitzvot
and commands us
to light the Hanukkah lights.

[An alternative translation from
The Tapestry of Jewish Time.]

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם
בְּזִמְן הַזֶּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
SH-ASA NEESEEM LA'AVOTEINU
BA-YA-MEEM HA-HEM
BAZ'MAN HA-ZE.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
Who performed wondrous deeds
for our ancestors
in days of old, at this season.

[A traditional translation.]

Blessed are You, Eternal One,
who worked miracles
for our ancestors
in those days
at this very time of the year.

[An alternative translation from
The Tapestry of Jewish Time.]

On the first night of the holiday, we add an additional blessing: the *Shehechyanu*. It is also said on other holidays which have “firsts,” and on other new occasions.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה',
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ
וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
SH-HEKH-I-YA-NU V'KI'MA-NU
V'HI-GI-A-NU LAZ'MAN HA-ZE.

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.]

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/]

Are There Traditional Foods For Hanukkah?

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.



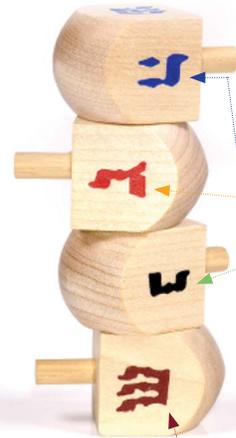
In Israel, the traditional food is doughnuts, called “*sufganiot*” in Hebrew, which are also fried in oil. After being fried, they are filled with custard or jelly and topped with powdered sugar.

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

Why Play With A Spinning Top (*Dreidel*)?

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 a group 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.



Where Does The Custom Of Gift Giving Come From?

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**

**For more information in the Atlanta area contact
404-991-2238 atlanta@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the Greater Boston area contact
617-581-6857 boston@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the Chicagoland area contact
312-550-5665 chicago@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the Los Angeles area contact
213-972-4072 losangeles@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the Philadelphia area contact
215-207-0990 philadelphia@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the San Francisco Bay area contact
415-878-1998 sfbayarea@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in the Washington DC area contact
202-618-4111 dc@interfaithfamily.com**

**For more information in all other areas contact
617-581-6862 network@interfaithfamily.com**

This booklet is one of a series originally created by Karen Kushner at The Jewish Welcome Network and revised and redesigned at InterfaithFamily with support of the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. Previous versions of some of the booklets were published by Project Welcome of the Union for Reform Judaism: www.urj.org/outreach.