

CHANUKAH

THE STORY OF CHANUKAH

The time is 169 to 166 BCE. The land of Israel is a subject state ruled by the Seleucids, a Syrian-Greek dynasty descended from a general in the armies of Alexander the Great. Antiochus had first invaded Jerusalem in 170 BCE, putting many to death, entering the Holy Temple and seizing its wealth. The assimilation to Greek-Hellenistic culture is reported to have been so strong that significant numbers of Jews embraced the more worldly, philosophical, hedonistic ways of their foreign rulers and collaborated with Antiochus in his efforts to Hellenize the Jews.

Antiochus attempted to stamp out Jewish worship and ritual, burning the Holy Books, banning the Festivals, Kosher food and circumcision and decreeing death for all who sought to remain loyal to Torah. The Temple in Jerusalem was dedicated to the Greek god Zeus and defiled by pagan ritual and sacrifice of unclean animals, a national calamity and disgrace. Jews, calling themselves *Hasidim* or “pious ones,” practiced defiance and passive resistance to spiritual death, and many met actual death.

The first story of Chanukah is a story of civil war and of desperate, heroic resistance to superior force and religious-cultural oppression. The resistance was a prolonged guerrilla war led by a priest named Mattathias and his five sons, including the famous Judah, called *Maccabee* or “hammer.” Their forces recaptured Jerusalem in 166 BCE. The narrative of these events is contained in a book called

DREIDEL, DREIDEL, DREIDEL

The dreidel is a four-sided top with a Hebrew letter on each side. The letters are *nun*, *gimel*, *hey* and *shin*. They represent the initial letters of the phrase “*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*,” meaning “A great miracle happened there.” These letters also stand for Yiddish words used as directions for the dreidel game. Players begin by “anteing” up an equal number of small objects—plastic chips, pennies or peanuts in the shell—into a common pot. Each player in turn spins the dreidel and follows the directions for that letter:

Nun stands for *Nisht*, meaning “nothing.” The player neither gives nor takes from the pot.

Gimmel stands for *Gantz*, meaning “all.” The player takes all of the pot.

Hey stands for *Halb*, meaning “half.” The player takes half the pot.

Shin stands for *Shtetl*, meaning “put in.” The player adds one to the pot.

If the pot empties, each player must ante up again so that play may continue.



GRANDMA'S GREAT POTATO LATKES

10 medium potatoes

3 eggs

1/4 cup matzo meal

2 large onions

Salt and pepper to taste

Peel, wash and cut potatoes into small pieces. Peel and dice onions. Put in blender in small quantities until grated. Keep covered in ice water until ready to fry. Beat eggs in blender, then add to potato/onion mixture. Drain and pat dry. Add matzo meal, salt and pepper. Deep fry in vegetable oil until crisp and drain on paper towels. Enjoy!

“Maccabees,” thought to have been compiled during the reign of the Jewish king John Hyrcanus (136-5 BCE). It describes how the victorious Maccabees rededicated the profaned Holy Temple by rituals of purification, tearing down the defiled altar and building a new one of unhewn stones, restoring and rebuilding the Temple and its grounds, replacing the sacred ritual vessels, rekindling the menorahs and reinstating the sacrifices. According to I Maccabees, the sanctuary was purified and dedicated to God on the 25th of Kislev, the same day of the month when it had first been defiled. The dedication of the altar was accompanied by a joyous celebration lasting eight days, similar to the rejoicing of Sukkot. Scholars believe the Maccabees were re-enacting Sukkot because both the First and the Second Temples had been dedicated on that important pilgrimage festival and they were unable to observe this major holiday when the Temple was in pagan hands. Note there is no mention of the single cruse of oil that burned for eight days.

The books celebrating the victory of the Maccabees are not part of the Hebrew Bible. They were rejected from the canon and declared *Sefarim Hizonim*, works to be kept secret. The reading of them was banned under penalties of severe punishment. The story of the Maccabees and their violent struggles survived in the Greek language and the “Old Testament” records of the Christian Church. Many Jews still have never read these books, although they are of course widely available in translations.

It is clear that the rabbis and scribes who demanded the exclusion of the book from the Holy Scriptures sought to de-emphasize the Maccabees’ revolt as the primary symbol of Chanukah. The Maccabees usurped power, making themselves and their progeny, kings and high priests in defiance of the ancient tradition of keeping religious and civil power separate. Their descendants provoked Roman interference in their dynastic struggles, leading to Roman conquest of all Judea. The Jewish world was brutally crushed by a remorseless Rome, the Temple destroyed in 70 CE and the land depopulated of Jews by death, enslavement, and forced exile after Bar Kochba’s revolt some sixty years later. To emulate the Maccabees was senseless and suicidal. The rabbis had other values and lessons to teach than armed struggle.

LIGHTING THE CANDLES

The candles are placed in the Chanukiah from right to left, but the candles are lit from left to right, so that each night, the newest candle is lit first.

8th night, Friday, December 18
 7th night, Thursday, December 17
 6th night, Wednesday, December 16
 5th night, Tuesday, December 15
Shamash
 4th night, Monday, December 14
 3rd night, Sunday, December 13
 2nd night, Saturday, December 12
 1st night, Friday, December 11



Since we are prohibited from using the light of the Chanukah candles for work or practical use, we use a special candle called the *Shamash* to light the rest. The candles should burn for at least half an hour. On Friday night, the Chanukah candles are lit before those for Shabbat.

The Miracle of the Lights

During the eight days of Chanukah, the Torah is read every day. On the first Shabbat of the holiday, the Haftarah portion is taken from the book of Zechariah, recounting his mystical vision of the rededication of the Second Temple after the return from Babylonian exile. In Chapter 4, the Prophet, shown a menorah of gold by an angel, asks, "What are these?" The angel tells him, "This is the word of the Eternal ... Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit ..." In the rabbinical tradition, the meaning of Chanukah is not found in the temptation to identify with the strength of human power and the force of arms, not by might, but by the divine spirit. In the Talmud (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b), the rabbis discuss what may and may not be used to kindle the Sabbath lights. They digress into a discussion of the rules for Chanukah when a surprising question is asked: "What is Chanukah?" The answer given is:

"Our rabbis taught that on the 25th of Kislev began the eight days of Chanukah, when mourning for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil there. When the Hasmonean dynasty overcame and defeated them, on searching, they found only a single cruse of oil that had the seal of the High Priest. In it was oil enough for one day. A miracle was wrought and it burned eight days. They ordained a festival with songs of praise and thanksgiving."

As Chanukah competes with Christmas, as we face our own challenges of assimilation, as simple Chanukah *gelt* is replaced by the expectation of expensive gifts, remember that Chanukah means dedication, whatever version of the holiday you wish to emphasize in your own observances.

Blessings

Following the teaching of the school of Hillel, as reported in the Talmud, one candle is lit the first night and the number is increased by one candle each night for eight days. The reason is that holiness should be increased, not diminished. The lamp is placed where the light can be seen from the outside to celebrate publicly the miracle of the lights.

RECITING THE BLESSINGS

First Blessing

Recite every night

*Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hai-nu
 meh-lech ha-o-lam a-sher
 ki-d'sha-nu b'mitz-vo-tav v'tzi-va-nu
 l'had-lik ner shel Chanukah.*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו
 קלך העולם, אשר
 קדשנו במצותך הטוב
 לתדליק נר של חנוכה.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You hallow us with Your Mitzvot, and command us to kindle the Chanukah lights.

Second Blessing

Recite every night

*Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hai-nu
 meh-lech ha-o-lam, shah-a-sa ni-sim
 lo-a-vo-tai-nu l'i-mo-tai-nu
 ba-ya-mim ha-heim ba-z'man ha-zeh.*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו
 קלך העולם, שעשה ניסים
 לאבותינו/לאמהותינו
 בזמנים קדומים בזמן הזה.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You showed wonders to our fathers/mothers in days of old, at this season.

Third Blessing

Recite first night only

*Ba-ruch a-ta A-do-nai, E-lo-hai-nu
 me-lech ha-o-lam, she-hecheyanu,
 v'ki-y-manu, v'higi-anu
 la-z'man hazeh.*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו
 קלך העולם, שהחיינו
 והקימו והגייסנו
 לזמן הזה.

We praise You, Eternal One, Sovereign God of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

Our Thanks to . . .

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