

# CHANUKAH: Some Historical Background

Part of the greatness of Reform Judaism lies in the fact that each Jew is free to select and observe those rituals which are most meaningful on a personal level. But choice implies knowledge of the options available to us—hence this discussion of Chanukah.

## 1. What does Chanukah mean?

The Hebrew word *Chanukah* means “dedication” and refers to the joyous eight-day celebration through which Jews commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the armies of Syria in 165 B.C.E. and the subsequent liberation and “rededication” of the Temple in Jerusalem.

## 2. Is Chanukah biblically based?

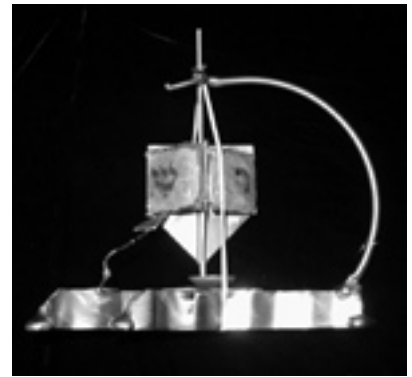
No. Unlike most Jewish holidays, Chanukah is not mentioned in the Torah, Prophets, or Writings. The historical events upon which the celebration is based are recorded in I and II Maccabees, two books contained within a later collection of writings known as the Apocrypha.

## 3. What is the Apocrypha?

When the final format of the Bible was debated (first century C.E.), a number of books were considered for inclusion but ultimately rejected. The two books of Maccabees were among those passed over. Some time later, due to the popularity which some of the rejected writings enjoyed among the people, fourteen of them were gathered into a single collection called the Apocrypha. The term Apocrypha comes from a Greek word meaning “hidden writing.” While the apocryphal works were never made part of the Hebrew Bible, they were included in the Greek and Latin versions.



4. If the story of Chanukah was so obscure, how did the holiday become so popular?



The Jewish people made it so. Technically, Chanukah is considered a “minor” Jewish festival. Yet it ranks along with Pesach and Purim as one of the most beloved Jewish family holidays. Clearly, the stirring story associated with Chanukah, the rituals which emerged from it, and the special Chanukah games and foods combined to capture the Jewish imagination and elevate its status within the Jewish community.

## 5. What is the story of Chanukah?

In the year 168 B.C.E., the Syrian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes sent his soldiers to Jerusalem. The Syrians desecrated the Temple, and Antiochus declared that Judaism was to be abolished. The only options he offered Jews were conversion or death. Altars and idols were set up through-out Judea for the purpose of worshiping Greek gods. Antiochus outlawed the observance of Shabbat, the festivals, and circumcision.

On the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev in 168 B.C.E., the Temple was renamed for the Greek god Zeus. Pigs were sacrificed in the Temple. The Torah was spattered with pigs’ blood and then burned. Thousands of Jews chose to die rather than commit idolatry. Among these martyrs was a woman named Hannah who, with her seven sons, defied the Syrian decree.

But slowly a resistance movement developed against the cruelty of Antiochus, led by a priestly family known as the Hasmoneans, or Maccabees. The head of the family was an elderly man named Mattathias. He and his five sons left Jerusalem and took up residence in a small town north of Jerusalem, called Modi’in. When Syrian soldiers appeared in the town and commanded the inhabitants to offer sacrifices to Zeus, Mattathias and his sons refused. Mattathias killed one Jew who began to sacrifice to Zeus, and his sons then turned upon the Syrian troops and slew them.

It was a turning point in the struggle. The Maccabees became instant folk heroes. Fleeing to the hills with their followers, they conducted a campaign of guerilla



warfare against the occupying Syrian forces. Mattathias's son, Judah, known as "The Hammer," became the chief strategist and military leader.

Furious, Antiochus decided to destroy totally the people of Judea. He sent a large army, with instructions to kill every man, woman, and child. Though outnumbered, Judah Maccabee and his fighters miraculously won two major battles, routing the Syrians decisively. By 165 B.C.E., the terror of Antiochus had ended. The Jews had won a victory for their land and their faith.

The idols were torn down, and, on the morning of the 25th day of Kislev in 165 B.C.E., the Temple in Jerusalem was reconsecrated—three years to the day after its original defilement. In celebration, the people of Jerusalem lit bright lights in front of their homes and decided to mark their deliverance with an annual eight-day festival. It was called the Feast of Lights, the Feast of Dedication, or simply Chanukah.

6. Is that why we celebrate Chanukah for eight days? What about the jar of oil that burned for eight days?

Originally, the eight-day Feast of Lights was intended to parallel the eight days of Sukkot. The books of Maccabees made no mention of the beautiful legend concerning the jar of oil which has come to be so much a part of Chanukah. It was several centuries later (500 C.E.) that the story of the cruse of oil emerged as part of the Talmud in an attempt by the rabbis to make God the hero of the story rather than the Maccabees. In that way, the military victory was minimized and God's saving power was emphasized.

The legend relates that when the Maccabees entered the Temple and began to cleanse it they immediately relit the Ner Tamid, or Eternal Light. A single jar of oil remained which was sufficient for only one day. The messenger who was sent to secure additional oil took eight days to complete his mission. But, miraculously, the single cruse of oil continued to burn for eight days. The rabbis of the Talmud, therefore, attributed the eight days of Chanukah to the miracle of the little jar of oil.

We continue the ancient customs related to Chanukah today, commemorating the liberation of our people and their affirmation of human dignity and freedom of religion. In Jewish homes throughout the world, the eve of the 25th of Kislev begins an eight-day celebration involving many joyous customs and ceremonies.

## CHANUKAH: Ceremonies, Symbols, Customs

The modern home celebration of Chanukah centers around the lighting of Chanukah candles in the menorah, unique foods, and special games and songs.

1. What is the meaning of menorah?

*Menorah* is a Hebrew word meaning candelabrum. In relation to Chanukah, it refers to the nine-branched ceremonial lamp in which the Chanukah candles are placed and then blessed. The modern Hebrew term for the Chanukah menorah is *Chanukiyah*.



## 2. Is the menorah unique to Chanukah?

No. The menorah originated as a religious symbol in biblical times. The Torah records (Exodus 25:31-37; 37:17-23) how the great artist Bezalel fashioned a seven-branched menorah for the desert tabernacle in fulfillment of a Divine commandment. Such a seven-branched menorah adorned the Temple in Jerusalem and was carried away by the Roman legions at the time of its destruction in 70 C.E. While the Roman Empire has long since vanished, a seven-branched menorah stands before the Knesset building in Israel, yet another tangible reminder of the indestructibility of the Jewish people.

## 3. How did the Chanukah menorah originate?

The nine-branched Chanukah menorah was a modification of the biblical model and seems to have originated in the first century C.E. It had eight branches, one for each day of the holiday, and a ninth branch for the shamash or “servant” light.

In ancient times, oil was used in the menorah. Over time, candles were substituted for the oil.

Interestingly, some scholars believe that the use of small candles for the menorah was a deliberate choice, designed to distinguish Chanukah lights from Christian votive candles. Except in times of religious persecution, the menorah was placed outside the front door or, as is the custom today, displayed in the window of every Jewish home.



## 4. How do we light the Chanukah candles?

In a celebrated talmudic dispute, two great Jewish teachers, Hillel and Shammai, argued whether we should begin by lighting

eight candles and gradually decrease to one (Shammai) or begin with one candle and add an additional one each night, thus continuously increasing the light and joy of the holiday (Hillel). The majority ruled with Hillel. Thus, on the first night of Chanukah, we recite or chant the blessings and light one candle with the shamash, two on the second night, and so on. Customarily, the candles are placed in the menorah from right to left but lit from left to right.

## 5. What are the Chanukah candle blessings?

There are two *berachot* which are chanted or recited on every night of Chanukah. The first is a blessing over the candles themselves:

**Baruch Atah, Adonai Elohenu, Melech haolom, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu lehadlik ner shel Chanukah.**

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who has sanctified us through your mitzvot and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah lights.*

The second *berachah* expresses thanks for the “miracle” of deliverance:

**Baruch Atah, Adonai Elohenu, Melech haolom, she’asah nisim laavotenu bayamim hahem bazeman hazeh.**

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who did wondrous things for our ancestors in former times at this season.*

There is a third *berachah* which is chanted or recited only on the first night. This is the “Shehecheyanu” prayer, pronounced by Jews on all happy occasions:

**Baruch Atah, Adonai Elohenu, Melech haolom, shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazeman hazeh.**

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who has kept us in life, sustained us, and brought us to this happy time.*

Any member or members of the family may chant or recite the blessings. One person lights and holds the *shamash*, the *berachot* are pronounced, and the candles are then lit. On Shabbat, the Chanukah candles are lit before the Shabbat candles.

## 6. How did the game of dreidel come to be associated with Chanukah?

*Dreidel* is a derivative of a German word meaning top, and the game is an adaptation of an old German gambling game. Chanukah was one of the few times of the year when the rabbis of old permitted games of chance. The dreidel, therefore, was a natural candidate for Chanukah entertainment. The four sides of the top bear four Hebrew letters: *Nun*, *Gimel*, *Hei*, and *Shin*. Players would begin by “anteing” a certain number of coins, nuts, or other objects. Each one in turn would then spin the dreidel and proceed as follows: *nun* (“nichts”)—take nothing; *gimel* (“ganz”)—take everything; *hei* (“halb”)—take half; *shin* (“shtell”)—put in. The winner would often receive money (Chanukah *gelt*). Over time, the gambling terms were reinterpreted to stand for the Hebrew phrase *Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*, “A great miracle happened there.” Thus, even an ordinary game of chance was invested with Jewish values and served to remind Jews of the important message of Chanukah. Today Jewish children throughout

the world continue to enjoy the game of dreidel. In Israel, one letter on the dreidel has been changed. The *Shin* has been replaced with a *Pei*, transforming the Hebrew phrase into *Nes Gadol Hayah Po*, “A great miracle happened here.”



## 7. Why do we eat latkes on Chanukah?

A common but rather far-fetched explanation is that we eat latkes (potato pancakes) because they are cooked in oil and thus remind us of the miracle of the single cruse. Rabbi Solomon Freehof, a great contemporary Jewish scholar, has hypothesized that the eating of latkes may have grown out of an old custom of eating *milchig* (dairy) foods on Chanukah. *Milchig* foods evolved into *milchig* pancakes and then into latkes, possibly because the main potato crop became available about the time of Chanukah. No one knows for certain how the association began, but, for anyone who feasts on latkes at Chanukah time, a historical rationale is unnecessary.

## 8. Why do we give gifts on Chanukah?

Again, no one knows for sure. Many scholars postulate that the practice is a carry-over from the biblically-based custom of sending gifts (*mishloach manot*) to one's friends on Purim. It is clear, however, that presents were never a major element in Chanukah which emphasizes enduring religious and ethical values.

## 9. Who wrote “Rock of Ages”?

*Ma'oz Tzur*, or Rock of Ages, was composed in Europe in the twelfth or thirteenth century by a man known as Mordecai. His words were set to different melodies over the centuries.

When all is said and done, perhaps the most important message of Chanukah may be found in the name of the holiday itself—Dedication. When Jews have dedicated themselves, through faith and action, to the pursuit of high religious and human ideals, Judaism has been strong. That imperative, to strengthen our religion and our people, remains an important challenge at this season—in every generation.

