

The Message, History and Meaning of Hanukkah

The Message

We are a very fortunate people. Our holidays reflect some of the most significant yearnings of humanity, and are particularly pertinent to our modern condition. They remind us of our identity with a people and our responsibility to all human beings.

Hanukkah, once a minor holiday for our people, can be a major celebration for us. It can provide the opportunity for rediscovering some of our people's highest aspirations. Its rituals can move us to rekindle these ideals in our actions.

The History

The Hebrew word *Hanukkah* means "rededication." The holiday derives its name from the Maccabean rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem on the 25th of the Hebrew month, *Kislev*, 165 BCE.

Prior to the year 167 BCE, the land of Israel and the surrounding countries were ruled by the Greek Syrians. A part of their ruling policy was a relentless campaign to destroy Judaism.

In 167 BCE on the 25th of *Kislev*, they entered the Temple of Jerusalem, defiled it by constructing altars to idols and began conducting pagan rites. That same year the Jewish people, under the courageous leadership of Mattathias of Modin and his son Judah Maccabeus, began their revolt. For three years Judah and his followers, who became known as Hasmoneans or Maccabees, waged a continuous fight for religious freedom. Finally, in 165 BCE they dislodged the enemy from large portions of Judea, gained control of Jerusalem, and restored the Temple.

Victoriously, on the 25th of *Kislev*, the same date the enemy had defiled the Temple, the Maccabees rededicated it as a symbol of their struggle for religious and political freedom.

We are told that *Hanukkah*, the ceremony of rededication, lasted eight days. Some attribute this to the wonderful legend of the miracle of the oil... that when the Maccabees were victorious and returned to Jerusalem to clean out and rebuild the Temple, they found only enough oil to light the *Ner Tamid* for one night. However, a miracle occurred and this oil lasted for eight days until a new supply of pure oil could be secured. Some believe that, because the Hasmoneans could not celebrate *Sukkot* (which lasts eight days) during the years of their revolution, they combined that holiday with the festivities of their rededication of the Temple. This would explain the reason why *Hanukkah* is eight days in length. Others believe that because the dedication of the Temple in Solomon's time lasted eight days, the Hasmoneans chose that same length of time for their celebration.

The Meaning

The flickering candles of *Hanukkah* remind us of our people's ancient quest for freedom and human dignity — for their right, as Jews, to live Jewish lives. They symbolize all the values for which they struggled.

In universal terms, the Maccabean revolution is not over... It is the pursuit of equal rights for all people and the realization of a society of genuine democracy. It is striving after a world where the oppressive forces of hunger, sickness, ignorance, and prejudice no longer tyrannize or torture the visions of human beings.

Hanukkah is a holiday of "rededication." It summons us to work for the noble dream of liberty, friendship, and peace among all peoples of the earth.



The Mitzvah of Hanukkah

It is a *mitzvah*...

- for each home to have its own *Hanukkah menorah*;
- to kindle the *Hanukkah* lights on each evening during the eight days of the festival;
- for parents to relate the story of *Hanukkah* to their children;
- for the whole family to participate in, and bear witness to, the lighting of the *Hanukkah* menorah;
- to share the lighting of the *menorah* and the meaning of *Hanukkah* with our friends and neighbors;
- to give charity during the eight days of *Hanukkah*.

— See other side for more information —



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In What Order Do We Light the Hanukkah Candles?

Many people question the order in which the *Hanukkah* candles should be lit. The correct way to light a *menorah* is while standing facing the front of your *menorah*, insert the candles into the holder from the right to left, not counting the *shamash*. On the first night, insert one candle; on the second night, insert two, etc. Always work from right to left. When lighting the candles, use the *shamash* to light the candles from left to right. In this way the candle representing the new night is always lit first.

Lighting the Menorah

Every night of the eight nights of *Hanukkah*, at nightfall, the *Hanukkah* lights must be kindled.

On the first night of *Hanukkah*, one light is kindled. On the following night, two. Third, three, etc., so on the eighth night, eight lights are kindled. (The *shamash* is not counted.)

On the first night, before kindling the light, three blessings are said. On the following nights, only the first two blessings are said.

The *Hanukkah* light must burn at least half an hour each night. Before kindling the lights, make sure that the candles are big enough to last half an hour.

The *menorah* must be placed on the window sill or on a table so that its light can be seen from the street... that we “publicize the miracle.”

No use should be made of the light shed by the *Hanukkah*, such as reading or working by their light.

When *Shabbat* and *Hanukkah* coincide, the *Hanukkah* candles are lit prior to the lighting of the *Shabbat* candles on Friday evening and after *Havdallah* on Saturday night.

The *Hanukkah* lights must be kindled in the Synagogue but this does not free anyone, not even the one who kindled them, from kindling them at home.



Dreidel Game

There is a long tradition of playing games of chance during the evenings of this holiday. The *dreidel* is a four-sided top printed with the Hebrew letters:

nun	gimmel	heh	shin
נ	ג	ה	ש

These letters represent the words “*nes gadol hayah sham*” and translate into “A great miracle happened there.”

Everyone in the game starts with 10-15 tokens (nuts, raisins, matchsticks or pennies). Each player puts one token into the middle (called the pot). The *dreidel* is spun by one player at a time. Whether he or she wins or loses depends on which face of the dreidel is up when it falls.

- *Nun*- *nisht* or “nothing.” Player does nothing.
- *Gimmel*- “all.” Player takes everything in the pot.
- *Heh*- *halb* or “half.” Player takes half.
- *Shin*- *shtel* or “put in.” Add two pieces to the pot.

When only one piece or none is left in the pot, every player adds one. When an odd number of objects are in the pot, the player rolling *heh*, “half” takes half the total plus one. When one person has won everything, the game is over.

Blessings for the Hanukkah Light

On the first night all three blessings are recited, and on succeeding nights only the first two.

1. *Baruch Atta Adonai, Elohenu Melech HaOlam, Asher Kiddishanu B'Mitsvotav V'Tzivanu L'Hadlik Ner Shel Hanukkah.*

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Thy commandments and has commanded us to kindle the *Hanukkah* light.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וציונו להדליק נר של חנוכה.

2. *Baruch Atta Adonai, Elohenu Melech HaOlam, Sheasah Nissim LaAvotenu Bayamim HaHem BaZeman HaZeh.*

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who didst perform miracles for our ancestors in those days at this season.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשה נסים לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

The following blessing is chanted only the first night:

3. *Baruch Atta Adonai, Elohenu Melech HaOlam, Sheh'Hecheyanu V'Kimanyu, V'Hig'Giyanu LaZ'Man HaZeh.*

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has granted us life and sustained us, and brought us to this season.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה.