

Fun Facts

🕯 Gifts are not an original feature of Chanukah. In the early 20th Century, people saw it as a way of creating joy around the time of the holiday. The outsized stature that Chanukah (a relatively minor holiday with no work restrictions) enjoys today is likely due to the Christmas holiday which shares proximity on the Julian calendar and dominates our broader American milieu.

🕯 In the original Hebrew, the 25th word in the Torah is *Or* (light). We begin lighting the Chanukah lights on the 25th day of the month of Kislev.

🕯 According to some estimates, Israelis will devour some 24 million *Sufganiyot* (jelly or custard-filled donuts) during the eight-day holiday, adding up to 10.8 billion calories!

🕯 The tradition of giving gelt during Chanukah likely originated in Eastern Europe in the 17th century as a practice to give money to children for distribution to their teachers. Over time, it spread to children as a small reward and reminder of the holiday's message: that even small acts can bring light. By the early 1900s, chocolate makers began wrapping chocolate in gold foil to resemble those coins, turning gelt into a treat enjoyed by families around the world.

🕯 When the Jews traveled following the Exodus from Egypt to the land of Israel, the twenty-fifth place they encamped was called *Chashmonah*. This can be seen as an allusion to the priestly family of *Chashmonaim* (Hasmoneans), who led the Maccabee armies in the battle against the Greeks, and who rested on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev.

“On a spiritual level, *pirsumei nisa* is charging us to publicly share our pride in being Jewish...Yes, there are times when this might take some real courage, but imagine what it was like for the tiny band of Maccabees taking on the Greek army. This is a holiday of courage! And you never know what miracles might be possible when we publicize who we truly are. So let us dispel the darkness and share the miracle of what it means to be Jewish today, and share your light with the world.”

– Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Senior Rabbi, Central Synagogue, New York City

All about Chanukah

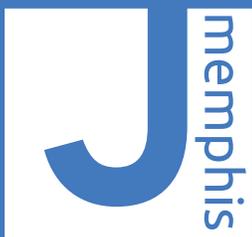
The festival of lights!

NIGHT OF

DAY OF

December 14–December 22

Kislev 25–Tevet 2



Even the smallest light can spark a miracle when we believe it can shine.



The Backstory

Chanukah is a Rabbinic holiday which celebrates miraculous events taking place well after the five books of Moses were recorded. Nevertheless, the message of faith is clear.

We celebrate the duality of Chanukah's commemoration, the celebration of a miraculous military victory by the Maccabees over Antiochus's Syrian (Seleucid) Greek army in the 2nd century BCE, and the miracle of the oil which took place upon the restoration and rededication (*Chanukah* חנוכה literally means "dedication") of the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem.

The reign of Antiochus was a dark one. The practice of Judaism was outlawed, he banned *Brit Milah* (ritual circumcision), outlawed the observance of Shabbat and the Festivals, and declared all must convert to worshipping the Greek gods, or choose death. The Temple was looted and desecrated, idols erected within its holy confines, and pigs sacrificed on the altar.

Many saintly Jewish women willingly risked their lives to circumcise their sons (see the book of Maccabees). Mattityahu, a *Kohein* (Jewish priest), and his five sons Yochanan, Shimon, Elazar, Yonatan, and Yehuda HaMaccabi (Judah the hammer) led a rebellion against the mighty and larger Greek army. Eventually, their revolt was successful,

recapturing Jerusalem and the Temple, and rededicating it with light on the 25th of Kislev – the date Antiochus had issued his dark decrees and the date of the 2nd Temple's original dedication.

The Talmud (Bavli Shabbat 21b) tells the story of how all the ritual oil had been defiled by the Greeks except for one cruse of pure oil which the Maccabees found and used to light the golden Menorah (the Temple's 7-armed candelabra) despite the fact that the oil could only last one day. G-d responds to their hope with a miracle, ensuring that single cruse of pure oil lasted 8 full days, sufficient to extend the light of their actions until additional pure oil could be produced.

We light the 9-armed menorah called a *Chanukiah* in commemoration of this miracle. During Chanukah there is a commandment to "publicize the miracle" (*pirsumei nisa* פרסומי ניסא) meaning that people should publicly display their menorah when they light it – somewhere visible for others to see from the street.



How We Celebrate

Lighting the Chanukiah: At this darkest time of year, eight nights of bright, warm light get added to our lives. We kindle flames on a special eight branched menorah (nine if you count the Shamash - helper candle which is lit every night) called a *chanukiah*, increasing the number of candles from 1 on the first night, 2 on the second, etc., until we reach 8 candles on the 8th and final night of Chanukah. While lighting the candles in the direction from left to right, the following blessings are recited:

First blessing: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנוּכָה

Ba-ruch a-tah Ado-nai e-lo-he-nu me-lech ha-olam a-she-ri ki-de-sha-nu be-mitz-vo-tav ve-tzi-va-nu le-had-lik ner shel Cha-nu-kah.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light.

Second blessing: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבְרָהָם בְּיָמָיו וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְחֵמַת הַצִּדְקָה

Ba-ruch a-tah Ado-nai e-lo-he-nu me-lech ha-olam she-a-sa ni-sim la-avo-te-nu ba-ya-mim ha-hem ba-zman ha-zeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, ruler of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this time.

Third blessing, recited only on the first night (or the first time lighting this Chanukah): בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהִצִּילנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְחֵמַת הַצִּדְקָה

Ba-ruch a-tah Ado-nai e-lo-he-nu me-lech ha-olam she-he-che-yu-nu ve-ki-yi-ma-nu ve-higi-a-nu laz-man ha-zeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, ruler of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.

Reciting Hallel and Al HaNissim: Within the daily morning prayer, *Hallel* – the special words of praise at G-d's miracles – is recited. Additionally, the *Al HaNissim* ('upon the miracles') prayer which recalls the miracle G-d performed in "delivering the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few..." during the revolt is inserted into the *Shemoneh Esrei* (the prayer at the heart of each of the day's prayer services), and *Birkat Hamazon* – the grace after meals.

Songs and Games: While there are many great Chanukah songs (just ask Adam Sandler), two are perhaps most traditional. They are *HaNeirot Halalu* ('We kindle these lights') and *Ma'oz Tzur* ('Rock of Ages'), recited immediately following the lighting of the Chanukah candles each night. The most famous song might be "I have a little *Dreidel*" which refers to a classic Chanukah game played with a 4-sided spinning top called a *dreidel*. Each side of the *dreidel* contains a Hebrew letter - נ (*Nun*), ג (*Gimel*), ה (*Hey*), and ש (*Shin*) standing for *Neis Gadol Haya Sham* – a great miracle happened there. In Israel, where the miracle took place, the last letter is פ (*Pei*) for the word *Po* – here.

Foods: Fried foods commemorate the miracle of the oil on Chanukah, with favorites including *latkes* (potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts). Additionally, many have the custom to eat dairy in memory of the courageous Jewish woman named Judith who seduced, fed and killed Holofernes, an enemy general. Chanukah *gelt*, gold coins made of chocolate, that are often used when playing *Dreidel*, are also popular treats.