

Hanukkah

Dear Families,

The story of Hanukkah began eight years prior to the heroic battles of the Maccabee brothers, when, in 175 BCE, Antiochus IV became head of the part of the Greek Empire ruled by the Seleucids (i.e., Syria). Antiochus wanted to spread Greek culture throughout the empire so he tried to eliminate all national and religious differences between his peoples. Most of the nations he ruled made a peaceful shift, but many Jews were not happy about his new policies because they forbade circumcision, Jewish study, and ritual observance.



Yes, there were Jews who assimilated into Greek culture - for example, changing their names (Jonathan to Jason), going to Greek theater, bathhouses, dressing like the Greeks, participating in physical sports, and even undergoing a painful surgery to “reverse” circumcision. But there were others who held fast to their own Jewish religious practices. Needless to say, conflicts arose between the Jew and Jew; this represents the starting point of the Maccabee story.

In 168 BCE, after they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, Antiochus’ army went to various cities to force the Jews to demonstrate their loyalty. One such town was Modin, the place where Mattathias and his family had fled. Antiochus’ officer asked Mattathias to show his leadership and offer a sacrifice. Mattathias refused, saying, “We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left!” Another Jew came forward to sacrifice on the pagan altar, instead. This angered Mattathias who killed the Jew, as well as Antiochus’ officer. He then shouted, “Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come with me!” and fled to the hills with his sons.

Once in the hills of Modin, the Maccabees engaged in guerrilla warfare. The mantle of leadership was passed from Mattathias to his son, Judah. Finally, in 165 BCE, the Maccabees liberated Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, restored its interior, and consecrated the courtyards.

They renewed the sacred vessels and the lamp-stand, and brought the altar of incense and the table into The Temple. . . Then, early on the 25th day of the ninth month, the month of *Kislev*, sacrifice was offered as the law commands on the newly made altar of burnt-offering. . . They celebrated the rededication of the altar for eight days. They decorated the front of The Temple with golden wreaths and ornamental shields. . . There was great merry-making among the people, and the disgrace brought on them by the foreign nations was removed.

I Maccabees 4:48-49, 52, 58

The celebration lasted for eight days, corresponding to the eight days of *Sukkot*, a holiday that they couldn’t observe properly in The Temple during the time of the most intense fighting against the Greeks.

One of the commandments (*mitzvot*) for Hanukkah is “publicizing the miracle,” what we call in Hebrew פְּרִסּוּם הַנֵּס (*pirsum ha-nes*). The *Talmud* (a book of law edited about 1500 years ago), says that the Hanukkah lights should be placed in a prominent place in order to let the world know about the miracle of the holiday.

The Hanukkah lights should be placed at the door of the house. A person who lives in an upper story, should place it in the nearest window to the public street. In time of danger, however, it is sufficient to place it on the table.

Talmud, Shabbat 21b

What is interesting is that the rabbis of the *Talmud*, who lived hundreds of years after the Maccabees, focused on a miracle from God: They recorded a story about the oil that miraculously lasted for 8 days . . . something that is not part of the earliest record of the Maccabee victory.



Lighting the *hanukkiyah* (*Hanukkah* menorah)
and the blessings to be said when lighting the candles



When lighting *Hanukkah* candles:



While facing the *hanukkiyah*, begin placing the candles on the far right side. Each night add one candle to the left. Remember to include a new *shamesh*! [The *shamesh* is the “helping candle.” On the *hanukkiyah* it is the ninth candle, which is usually set apart from, and higher than, the other eight. You will use a *shamesh* candle each night to light all the other candles.]



Light the *shamesh* first. Recite the blessings (below). Three blessings are said on the first night, and two are said on the other nights.

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

We praise You, Eternal God, Ruler of the universe, who makes us holy through Your *mitzvot*, and commands us to kindle the *Hanukkah* lights.

Baruh atah ado-nai, eloheinu meleh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah

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

We praise You, Eternal God, Ruler of the universe, who worked miracles for our ancestors in days long ago at this season.

Baruh atah ado-nai, eloheinu meleh ha-olam, she'a-sa nisim la'avoteinu, bayamim ha-hem ba-z'man hazeh.

This prayer is said only on the first night of Hanukkah.

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

We praise You, Eternal God, Ruler of the universe, who has kept us alive and well, and has brought us to this season.

Baruh atah ado-nai, eloheinu meleh ha-olam, she'he'he-yanu v'kiy'manu v'hi-gi-anu la-z'man hazeh.



Always light the newest candle first, working your way left to right (lighting the left-most-candle, ending with the right).



The candles should be lit at sundown or later, except on *Shabbat* when the *Hanukkah* candles are lit before the *Shabbat* candles.

THINGS YOU CAN DO AS A FAMILY



There is a *mitzvah* called, פרסום הנס (*pirsum ha-nes*; publicizing the miracle), obligating us to light the *hanukkiyah* (the Hebrew name for the *Hanukkah* menorah) and place it in front of a window so that when others pass by, they are reminded of the miraculous victory of the Maccabees. As a family, light the *hanukkiyah* each night of the holiday and place it in front of a window.



Allow your child(ren) to take an active part in lighting the candles by having them pick the candles and placing them in the *hanukkiyah*. Can they make a pattern with the colors? As you light the candles, have a young child place his or her hand on your arm and go through the motions with you.





Discuss different ways of celebrating holidays. These might include sending cards and placing decorations around the house. Connect this to Hanukkah by creating cards to send to relatives and friends and by decorating your home.



During the time of Antiochus, the Jews were prohibited from practicing their religion. However, Jews continued to study in secret and used the game of *dreidel* to mask their studies. If a Greek soldier would enter the room where they were studying, they would pretend to be engaged in a game of *dreidel*! Allow your children to practice spinning a *dreidel*. [For very young children, this will be a hard physical task.] For instructions on playing the *dreidel* game see www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Hanukkah/TO_Hanukkah_Home/Dreidel/Dreidel_Rules_357.htm



Designate the time when the candles are burning each night as “family time.” Play games with your children, sing Hanukkah songs or read stories.



It is a custom on Jewish holidays to give *tz’dakah*. As a family, choose a favorite organization and donate money. You may also wish to give of yourselves by performing *g’milut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness). Visit the residents of a home for elderly residents and brighten their day! Some families choose one night where, instead of gifts to each other, money or something tangible is given to those in need.



It is a Jewish custom to eat foods that are fried in oil to commemorate the miracle of the oil lasting eight days. Two foods that are often served are potato latkes and donuts. As a family try out a new latke or donut recipe (recipes can be found at the website below) and enjoy a delicious treat!

For additional background information, family activities, and holiday recipes, see:
<http://www.jccathisnewmonth.org> (click on *Kislev*)
or <http://uahc.org/educate/parent/> (click on *Chanukah*)



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