



HANUKKAH: The Festival of Lights

The story of Hanukkah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but allowed the lands under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this relatively benevolent rule, many Jews assimilated much of Hellenistic culture, adopting the language, the customs and the dress of the Greeks, in much the same way that Jews in America today blend into the secular American society.

More than a century later around 160 BCE (Before the Common Era), a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV was in control of the region. He began to oppress the Jews severely, placing a Hellenistic priest in the Temple, massacring Jews, prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion, and desecrating the Temple by requiring the sacrifice of pigs (a non-kosher animal) on the altar. Two groups opposed Antiochus: a basically nationalistic group led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and his son Judah Maccabee, and a religious traditionalist group known as the Chasidim. They joined forces in a revolt against both the assimilation of the Hellenistic Jews and oppression by the Seleucid Greek government. The revolution succeeded and the Temple was rededicated.

According to tradition, at the time of the rededication, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the *menorah* (candelabrum) in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. There was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet miraculously, it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the *menorah*. An eight-day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle. Note that the holiday commemorates the miracle of the oil, not the military victory: Jews do not glorify war.

The only religious observance related to the holiday is the lighting of candles. The candles are arranged in a candelabrum called a *menorah* (or sometimes called a *hanukkiah*) that holds nine candles: one for each night, plus a *shammash* (servant) at a different height. On the first night, one candle is placed at the far right. The *shammash* candle is lit and three *berakhot* (blessings) are recited. After reciting the blessings, the first candle is then lit using the *shammash* candle, and the *shammash* candle is placed in its holder. The candles are allowed to burn out on their own after a minimum of 1/2 hour. Each night, another candle is added from right to left (like the Hebrew language). Candles are lit from left to right (because you pay honor to the newer thing first).

It is traditional to eat fried foods on *Hanukkah* because of the significance of oil to the holiday. Among Ashkenazic Jews, this usually includes *latkes*, potato pancakes. Gift-giving is not a traditional part of the holiday, but has been added in many parts of the world. Another tradition of the holiday is playing *dreidel* a gambling game played with a square top. Most people play for pennies, M&Ms, or chocolate coins called *gelt*. The traditional explanation of this game is that during the time of Antiochus' oppression, those who wanted to study *Torah* (an illegal activity) would conceal their activity by playing gambling games with a top (a common and legal activity) whenever an official or inspector was within sight.

A *dreidel* is marked with four Hebrew letters: *Nun*, *Gimel*, *Hei* and *Shin*. These letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "*Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*", a great miracle happened there, referring to the miracle of the oil. There are some variations in the way people play the game, but one way is that everyone puts in one coin. A person spins the *dreidel*. If it lands on *Nun*, nothing happens; on *Gimel*, you get the whole pot; on *Hei*, you get half of the pot; and on *Shin*, you put one in. When the pot is empty, everybody puts one in. Keep playing until one person has everything. Then re-divide it, because nobody likes a poor winner.

Here are some suggestions to help your residents celebrate and get ready for Hanukkah.

1. Prepare and serve *latkes* (potato pancakes).

Recipe for Latkes: makes approximately 12 palm-sized latkes

- 4 medium potatoes
- 1 medium onion
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup matzah meal (flour can also be used)
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. each salt and black pepper
- Vegetable oil

Shred the potatoes and onion into a large bowl. Press out all excess liquid. If using a food processor, use the chopping blade for 2 or 3 seconds after pressing out liquid to avoid stringy fly-aways.

Add eggs and mix well. Add matzah meal gradually while mixing until the batter is doughy, not too dry. You may not need the whole amount, depending on how well you drained the veggies.

Add the baking powder, salt and pepper, and mix well. Don't worry if the batter turns a little orange; that will go away when it fries.

Heat about 1/2 inch of oil to medium-high heat. Form the batter into thin patties about the size of your palm. Fry batter in oil. Be patient: this takes time, and too much flipping will burn the outside without cooking the inside. Flip when the bottom is golden brown.

Place finished latkes on paper towels to drain. Eat hot with sour cream or applesauce.

2. Hold a candle lighting ceremony each evening at sundown. Try to invite a clergy member one night to assist.

3. Have a table with *Hanukkah* books, chocolate candy in the shape of money called *gelt*, and *dreidels*.

4. Host a *Hanukkah* party for all the residents, invite family and friends.

The information above was taken from www.Jewfaq.org

For more information on *Hanukkah*, please visit:

www.myjewishlearning.com

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/holidaya.html

www.holidays.net