



What is *Hanukkah?*



חנוכה Hanukkah לתקום שמן



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An Overview

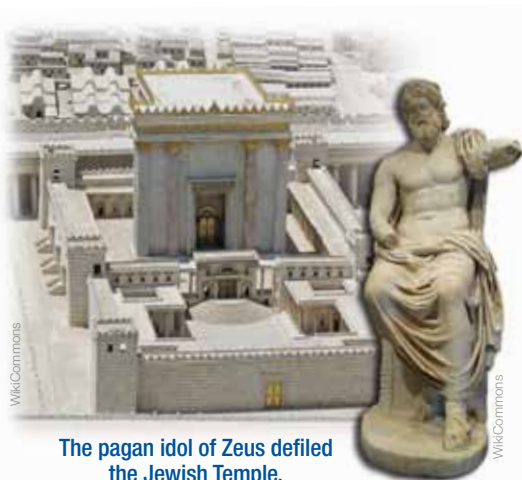
The joyous festival of *Hanukkah* begins on the 25th of the Jewish month of *Kislev*, which usually falls during December. It celebrates two miracles—a great Jewish military victory and a miraculous supply of oil for the Temple.

While *Hanukkah* is a special celebration for Jewish people, it is not a holy day. *Hanukkah* is not a biblical celebration, either. *Hanukkah* is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible—what Christians call the Old Testament—because the events surrounding it took place after the closing of the Hebrew Bible. But it is mentioned in the New Testament: John 10:22, states that the people were gathered at the “feast of dedication”—or *Hanukkah*—in Jerusalem. Jesus celebrated *Hanukkah*!



The Military Victory

At *Hanukkah*, Jews commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the Greek/Syrian forces of King Antiochus in the year 165 B.C.E. That regime sought to impose paganism on the Jewish people.



The pagan idol of Zeus defiled the Jewish Temple.

Through many means, rulers tried to convince Jews of the value of paganism over the Bible and over Judaism. They put a pagan idol, Zeus, in the Temple, and they forced Jews to eat non-kosher food. They forbade circumcision, which the Bible says is the sign of the covenant between God and Israel. There were some Jews who accepted this new culture. They might have thought, “Well, this is Greece. This is Rome. This is the way of modernity. That old way of the Bible is passé. It’s time to move on.”

Finally, though, there was a group of people who said to their fellow Jews, “Enough! We cannot accommodate this idolatry, disobedience, and immodesty. We’re going to stand up for the Jewish values and the Bible that brought us to this place.” A group

called the Maccabees, led by a man named Mattathias and his brothers, revolted against the Hellenistic authorities. And by the 25th day of the month of *Kislev*, they regained control over the Temple, cleansed it from the defilement, and rededicated it. That's what *Hanukkah* means: "rededication."

The Spiritual Victory

Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday because any time there was a dedication of the Temple in the Bible, it was an eight-day celebration. (See 2 Chronicles 29:17 and Nehemiah 8:18.) So, when the Jews regained the Temple and took out all the impurities and idols, they had a celebration that lasted for eight days.

This is more than just the celebration of victory in a physical battle. Zechariah 4:6 says, "‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty." This became an important verse for *Hanukkah* and is in fact written on the *menorah* in Jerusalem that stands across from the Knesset, Israel's parliament. It serves to remind Jews not just of the military victory, but of the ultimate triumph of God and the spiritual victory of the Jews over their oppressors.

The Miracle of the Oil

Hanukkah also celebrates a second miracle. In the Temple, there was an eternal flame that had to stay lit all the time. (See Exodus 27:20-21.) Walk into any synagogue today and you will see something commemorating that eternal flame, though now it's usually a light bulb. This signifies that God's presence is there all the time, in the same way that we light an eternal flame in memory of a president or great person to signify that their spirit never dies.

So, when the Jewish people came into the Temple to light the eternal flame, there was only one flask of pure olive oil to use—enough to keep the flame burning for one day. They could only use pure oil, not oil that had been touched by the pagans and used for sacrifices to the pagan gods. And they knew they did not have enough and that it would take eight days to get more oil.

But they went ahead and lit the flame anyway, which sends a beautiful message of trusting in God. Some may have said, "Why bother? It will go out anyway after a day, and then we'll have to wait for the oil." But they trusted in God, and a miracle occurred—the lamp that was only to last for one day stayed lit for eight days, until the new oil came in. This is how *Hanukkah* became the "Festival of Lights."

The Menorah

The *menorah*, a major symbol of *Hanukkah*, reminds Jews of the miracle of the oil. The *Hanukkah menorah* holds nine candles, one for each of the eight nights and an additional candle that's used to light the others. One candle is lit on the first night of *Hanukkah*, number two on the second, until all eight candles are lit on the eighth night.

In addition to lighting the *menorah* and reading liturgy, *Hanukkah* is also a time to celebrate with family and friends, eat holiday treats, give gifts (especially to children), and play the dreidel (spinning top) game.



A Christian Reflection on Hanukkah

For further study, read the chapter on Hanukkah from Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein's book on Judaism, *How Firm a Foundation*, that is included at the end of this study. Then answer the questions individually or as a group.



1. *How Firm a Foundation*, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein writes about the spiritual themes found in *Hanukkah*, “The festival of *Hanukkah* bids us to rededicate our lives to Jewish values and ideals that were preserved by the Maccabean victory, just as the Jews then rededicated the Temple.”

During this season, in what ways can you rededicate yourselves to God?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18–20. How does Paul describe our body? In what ways do we “defile” our bodies?

2. Another underlying theme in *Hanukkah*, according to Rabbi Eckstein, is *bitachon*, or trusting in God. From your understanding of the *Hanukkah* story, in what ways did the Jews demonstrate their trust in God?

How was their trust rewarded?

In what ways do you show your trust in God?

How has that trust been rewarded by God?

- 3. Rabbi Eckstein notes that the Jewish community under the Hellenistic culture was under great pressure to forego their faith and adopt the culture’s mores—a pressure, he suggests, that still exists today.

Rabbi Eckstein writes, “The challenge [North American Jews] face today is whether or not they can live in both [Western and Jewish] civilizations without in the process surrendering their unique Jewish faith and heritage. Only when Jews remain true to their covenant can they hope to fulfill their divine mission of serving as a holy people and a blessing to all the nations of the world.”



In what ways do you see parallels to Christians in today’s society?

In what ways have you personally felt that pressure?

In what ways can Christians stay true to their faith?

How can that be balanced living in a pluralistic society?

- 4. Rabbi Eckstein notes that *Hanukkah* also “reminds us of our duty to uphold the principles of religious freedom, liberty, and justice for all people. It strengthens the Jew’s resolve to worship God under oppressive conditions.” From what you know of Jewish history, how do you see this resolve being played out?

In what ways did they persevere?

From the following biblical accounts, how have Christians been persecuted for their faith?

Acts 5:17–32

Acts 6:8–15; Acts 7:54–60

Acts 12:1–11

Acts 16:16–40

2 Corinthians 11:16–31

How have these examples encouraged you in your own faith walk?

Based on your own knowledge, where are Christians being persecuted today?

The Minor Holidays

Hanukkah



Historically a minor Jewish festival, *Hanukkah* is the only one without a biblical basis (although it is cited in the Christian Bible, see John 10:22). Nevertheless, it has evolved into one of the most festive and widely celebrated of all Jewish holidays, perhaps because it falls so close to Christmas. Children especially get caught up with the overall excitement of the season. *Hanukkah* is observed for eight days, beginning on the twenty-fifth day of the Hebrew month *Kislev*, which usually falls in December. All forms of work are permitted during this time.

Hanukkah, meaning “Feast of Dedication,” commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over King Antiochus Epiphanes and his Syrian-Greek forces in 165 B.C.E. The Antiochus regime tried to impose the dominant Hellenism and paganism of its time upon the Jews, many of whom, such as the High Priest Joshua who changed his name to Jason, were already fully assimilated and eager to cooperate in imposing Hellenistic “enlightenment” upon their “backward” brethren. Some Jews even reversed their circumcisions through a painful operation as a demonstration of their acceptance of Hellenistic universalism and rejection of Jewish distinctiveness and separateness.

Antiochus imposed a number of restrictions on the Jews’ religious freedom. He placed a pagan altar in the Jerusalem temple for the adoration of Zeus and offered swine flesh upon it, an especially abominable desecration; he forbade the act of circumcision, which Hellenistic culture viewed as especially irreverent since it marred the beauty of the human form; he prohibited Jews from studying *Torah* and even burned *Torah* scrolls; and he erected gymnasiums and forced Jewish youth to participate naked as was the Greek custom. The punishment for not abiding by these decrees was death. The very survival of Judaism was at stake.

Finally, a small band of Jews led by Mattathias of the priestly Hasmonean family and his five sons, including Judah Maccabee who organized them into a guerrilla fighting army, arose in defiance of the Hellenist authorities and revolted. Their struggle endured for three years and culminated in 165 B.C.E. on the twenty-fifth day of *Kislev* with the reestablishment of Jewish political sovereignty over Jerusalem and their control over the temple. The Jews cleansed and purified the defiled temple of pagan idolatry and restored Jewish worship in its place. They celebrated the rededication of the temple by kindling the *menorah*, or “candelabrum,” for eight days as Solomon had done in the first temple. Hence, the festival is called *Hanukkah*, meaning, “dedication,” and is celebrated for eight days. Another view is that the eight-day celebration was modelled after the consecration ceremony of the desert tabernacle, not after the dedication of Solomon’s temple (see Leviticus 8:8-10). The second book of Maccabees offers a third explanation that because the Maccabees were in hiding on *Sukkot* and could not observe it properly; they celebrated the holiday belatedly upon their victory. This rationale would be very much in line with the fact that *Hanukkah* was originally called “the *Sukkot* of the month of *Kislev*” (see 2 Macc. 1:9; 10:6-8).



How Firm a Foundation, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein.
Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1997

The primary sources for our knowledge of the events of *Hanukkah* are the first and second books of the Maccabees which, although not canonized as part of the Jewish Bible itself, do constitute part of Jewish apocryphal literature. They describe the events of *Hanukkah* in the following way:

Then said Judah and his brothers, “Behold, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it.” So all the army assembled and they went up to Mount Zion. And they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins. Then they rent their clothes, and mourned with great lamentation, and sprinkled themselves with ashes. They fell face down on the ground, and sounded the signal on the trumpets, and cried out to Heaven. Then Judas...chose blameless priests devoted to the law, and they cleansed the sanctuary (1 Macc. 4:36-43).

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of *Kislev*, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering, which they had built.... All the people fell on their faces and worshipped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days.... There was very great gladness among the people and the reproach of the Gentiles was removed.

Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of *Kislev* (1 Macc. 4:52-53, 55-56, 58-59).

The *Talmud*, on the other hand, offers a somewhat different reason for the holiday. “What is *Hanukkah*? Our rabbis stated:

‘Commencing with the twenty-fifth day of *Kislev*, there are eight days during which mourning and fasting are forbidden. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against them and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil, sufficient for but one day’s lighting, which lay with the seal of the High Priest. Yet a miracle was wrought therein and with it they lit the lamp therewith for eight days. The following year these days were appointed a Festival with the recital of Hallel and thanksgiving’ (B.T. Shab. 21b).

Like the book of Maccabees, both Maimonides and the special liturgical prayer recited on this holiday suggest that the principal miracle celebrated on *Hanukkah* is that of the military victory that enabled the Jews to rededicate the temple and to worship God freely. *Hanukkah* marks the victory of the few over the many, of the weak over the mighty, and of those with faith in God and commitment to religious freedom over the pagan tyrants of the world. The *Talmud* and later tradition maintain that in addition to the miracle of the military victory, another miracle took place. They suggest that as the Jews purified the temple, they were able to find only one remaining flask of pure olive oil, capable of keeping the eternal light burning for only one day. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days and eight nights, after which time they were able to find new oil.

Hanukkah was a controversial holiday for a number of centuries and did not achieve total acceptance until well into Talmudic times. The rabbis’ reluctance to sanction the holiday can, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that they felt uneasy about commemorating a military victory. That may also be why they insisted that the primary reasons for celebration were that the temple was rededicated and that the *menorah* oil miraculously burned for eight days. Not surprisingly then, the prophetic portion selected by the rabbis to be read on *Hanukkah* comes from the book

of Zechariah and includes the verse, “*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit [shall you prevail], says the Lord of hosts*” (4:6). And yet, the motif of the military victory did remain important if not central to the commemoration of the holiday. For were it not for the successful Maccabean revolt, paganism and Hellenism would likely have been imposed upon the Jews. Had that happened, the very foundations of Judaism might have been destroyed and Christianity might never have come to be. In other words, if not for the miracle of the Jewish military defeat over the Syrian-Greek tyrants, there might be no Judaism and no Christianity in existence today.

Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived in the first century, was also ambiguous about the meaning of the holiday. He claimed that the festival was called the “Feast of Lights” because the free practice of our religion was to us like a rising day of light.”

Nowhere does he even mention the miracle of the oil that the *Talmud* later affirmed to be the holiday’s central event. Despite all of these factors, by the fifth century C.E., *Hanukkah* was fully entrenched in the Jewish calendar.

Hanukkah celebrations centre around the home. The lighting of the nine-branched *menorah* (as distinguished from the one with eight branches that was used in the temple) serves as the predominant holiday ritual. On the first night we light one candle, and on each successive night we light an additional one so that on the eighth and final day of the holiday, all nine candles are lighted (the ninth candle, or *Shamash*, is used to light the others). The *menorah* is placed near a window facing the outside so that passersby will see it and be reminded of the miracle.

It is customary for children to play with a *dreidel*, a small, four-sided, spinning top inscribed with the four Hebrew letters, *N. G. H. SH.*, one on each of its sides. The letters are an acronym for the Hebrew words *Nes Gadol Hayab Sham*, meaning, “a great miracle happened there.” The origin of this custom is uncertain. However, it is believed to have evolved from the fact that, in spite of Antiochus’s tyrannical decrees, many Jews defied the authorities and gathered secretly to study and practice the *Torah*. To protect themselves, they posted children outside playing *dreidel* and keeping a lookout for the soldiers. That way they would be alerted in case of a raid. There is also an old custom, independent of the Christmas one, of giving *gelt*, or “money,” to the children (although today people usually give presents) so that they will rejoice in the holiday, too.

The festival of *Hanukkah* bids us to rededicate our lives to the Jewish values and ideals that were preserved by the Maccabean victory, just as the Jews then rededicated the temple. The theme of martyrdom, dying *al kiddush hashem*, “in sanctification of God’s name,” became central to the Jewish understanding of the *Hanukkah* story and profoundly influenced later Jewish and Christian life and thought, as well. Jews were tenacious in their convictions. They sacrificed their lives for the right to practice their faith freely.

The book of Maccabees describes one such incident in which the king tried to force Hannah, a Jewish woman, and her seven sons to eat swine. Rather than transgress the laws of God, each of the sons submitted to gruesome torture and death, encouraged and strengthened by their mother who assured them that they would meet in the next world where they would be resurrected together. In the end, Hannah also was killed. Unlike Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his one and only son but in the end was prevented from doing so, Hannah gave up all seven of her sons, as well as her own life, in “sanctification of God’s name” (see 2 Macc. 7:1-41). Martyrdom, as well as the rewards of resurrection, immortality, and the world to come, became powerful motifs later on in Jewish history. Jews came to realize that the survival of their faith, at times, required the supreme sacrifice of individual lives.

In other words, if not for the miracle of the Jewish military defeat over the Syrian-Greek tyrants, there might be no Judaism and no Christianity in existence today.

North American Jews are a minority group, living within two great cultures—Western and Jewish civilizations. The challenge they face today is whether or not they can live in both without in the process surrendering their unique Jewish faith and heritage. Only when Jews remain true to their covenant can they hope to fulfill their divine mission of serving as a holy people and a blessing to all the nations of the world.

The holiday of *Hanukkah* reminds us of our duty to uphold the principles of religious freedom, liberty, and justice for all people. It strengthens the Jew's resolve to worship God even under oppressive conditions.

As Jews light the *Hanukkah* candles, they recall that the rise and continued survival of the embattled state of Israel lends testimony, no less than that of the Maccabean victory, to God's miracles and acts of salvation. The spirit of God still hovers in the world; faith, in fact, ultimately triumphs over the brute forces of evil.

The holiday of *Hanukkah* reminds us of our duty to uphold the principles of religious freedom, liberty, and justice for all people.

Footnotes

3. Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differed* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1956), 30.

BUILDING BRIDGES, SAVING LIVES

The *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews*, a philanthropic organization, was founded in 1983 to promote better understanding and cooperation between Christians and Jews, and build broad support for people in need. *IFCJ Canada*, established in 1999, has delivered over \$60 million in support of humanitarian programs aiding the elderly, sick, orphaned and at-risk populations in Israel, the former Soviet Union and other areas of the world.



Isaiah 58.



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