

Chanukah



Hanukkah (alternately spelled Chanukah, Hanukah), meaning "dedication" in Hebrew, refers to the joyous eight-day celebration during which Jews commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the armies of Syria in 165 B.C.E. and the subsequent liberation and "rededication" of the Temple in Jerusalem. According to folklore, when the Maccabees entered the Temple and began to reclaim it from the Greeks, they immediately relit the *ner tamid* (eternal light), which burned constantly in the Temple and has a parallel in our synagogues to this day. In the Temple, they found a single jar of oil, which was sufficient for only one day. The messenger who was sent to secure additional oil took eight days to complete his mission, and miraculously, the single jar of oil continued to burn until his return. The Book of the Maccabees tells a different story. The eight days matches the eight days of Sukkot, that the Jews were unable to celebrate at the appropriate time because of the Greek control of the temple. Still another tradition argues that eight soldiers ascended the citadel to rededicate the temple, and we celebrate one day for each of the eight soldiers who turned from fighting to peaceful dedication. The rabbis of the Talmud attributed the eight days of Hanukkah to the miracle of this single jar of oil.

The modern home celebration of Hanukkah centers around the lighting of the *chanukiyah*, a special menorah for Hanukkah; foods prepared in oil including latkes (potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts); and special songs and games.

Ritual Objects



Menorah is a Hebrew word meaning “candelabrum.” The Hanukkah *Menorah* is the nine-branched ceremonial lamp in which the Hanukkah candles are placed and blessed each night of the holiday. The nine branches include eight branches, one for each day of the holiday, and one branch for the *shamash* (servant) candle that is used to light the other candles.

The word **dreidel** derives from a German word meaning “spinning top,” and is the toy used in a Hanukkah game adapted from an old German gambling game. Hanukkah was one of the few times of the year when rabbis permitted games of chance. The four sides of the top bear four Hebrew letters: *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, and *shin*. Players begin by putting into a central pot or “kitty” a certain number of coins, chocolate money known as *gelt*, nuts, buttons or other small objects. Each player in turn spins the dreidel and proceeds as follows:



nun – take nothing;
gimmel – take everything;
hey – take half;
shin – put one in.



Over time, the letters on the dreidel were reinterpreted to

stand for the first letter of each word in the Hebrew statement “*Neis gadol hayah sham*,” which means “A great miracle happened there” and refers to the defeat of the Syrian Greek army and the re-dedication of the Temple.