

HANUKKAH חנוכה | חֲנֻכָּהּ THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

The Festival of Hanukkah celebrates the re-dedication of the Temple after the triumph of the Maccabees over the Greeks in 164 BCE. At Hanukkah people remember the tradition of the miracle of the Temple menorah that burned for eight days on a supply of oil that was sufficient for only one day—remembering miracles is to celebrate God’s intervention in our lives. The Hanukkah Festival of Lights is celebrated for eight days beginning on the 25th of Kislev (Nov/Dec) and extends over the darkest time of the year.

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of God’s intervention in our lives.

The evening kindling of the Hanukkah menorah candles—the number lit each night is increased from one through to eight as the days pass—helps to create a sense of the miracle of light that is celebrated during the days of Hanukkah.

The background to the festival is the Hellenization of Jewish culture which, since the days of Alexander (336-323 BCE), had increasingly eroded Jewish life. During the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (c. 215-164 BCE) conflict arose over the appointment of the High Priests resulting in Antiochus’ banning, in 167 BCE, of Jewish sacrifices, the keeping of Sabbath and feasts, the possession of Jewish scriptures, and circumcision. The Temple in Jerusalem was desecrated with sacrifices being made to Greek gods. [Some modern scholars have seen Antiochus’ intervention as a reaction to internal Jewish conflict between traditional Jews and Hellenizing Jews.]

Mattathias, a Jewish priest from Modin, sparked a revolt when he refused to sacrifice to the Greek gods and killed a Hellenistic Jew who attempted to offer the sacrifice in his place. Mattathias, a Hasmonean, and his sons fled to the wilderness of Judea. After the death of Mattathias in 166 BCE his son Judah led an army which eventually entered Jerusalem and ritually cleansed the Temple.

The account of the Maccabean drama and the re-dedication of the Temple is recounted in the two Books of Maccabees. The festival of Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. The word *hanukkah* חֲנֻכָּהּ (חנוכה in Modern Hebrew) means “consecration” or “dedication.” The festival is mentioned in the Gospel of John, “At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem...” (10:22).

THE FESTIVAL OF HANUKKAH IS EIGHT DAYS

The festival of Hanukkah is celebrated over eight days. The length of days is explained thus:

- 1 There is a tradition that after the cleansing of the Temple only one sealed container of sacred oil could be located for the temple Menorah. This was enough oil for one day only but, miraculously, the Menorah burned for eight days allowing time for a new batch of oil to be prepared. Critical scholarship has suggested that the rabbis invented this tradition to give a deeper religious meaning to the festival and move focus away from the nationalistic glorification of the Maccabees and the triumph over the Seleucid Greeks (*Encyclopedia of Judaism*, p. xviii).
- 2 The First Book of Maccabees recounts that the dedication of the rebuilt altar was celebrated with sacrifices for eight days (4:56) and that Judah Maccabee determined that all Israel should celebrate that season every year for eight days (4:59) beginning on the 25th Kislev. No mention is made in the Books of Maccabees regarding the tradition of the miracle of the oil.
- 3 Historians believe the eight day festival may have had its origins in the celebration of the eight days of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, these days being celebrated after the rededication of the Temple by Judah Maccabee, the celebration having being delayed because of the war. A special feature of the celebration of Sukkot was the lighting of the temple Menorah every evening (M. Sukkah 5:3). According to 2 Maccabees there is a connection between the Festival of Sukkot and the rededication of the temple by Nehemiah who earlier rebuilt the Temple and altar and is associated with a miracle of fire which miraculously lit the sacrificial flames (2 Macc. 1:1-2:18).
- 4 Eight candles, eight days. Eight is a number which has religious significance in Judaism. It suggests eternity. Seven being the number of days of creation, eight days reaches beyond perfection to the infinite. A spiritual parallel might be seen in the circumcision (*brit milah*) which occurring on the eight day represents the entry of the child into God’s covenant.

THE TALMUD DISCUSSES THE HANUKKAH CANDLES

The Rabbis taught that Hanukkah was established on account of the miracle by which the Temple menorah remained kindled eight days on one flask of oil (Shabbat 21b).

1. According to Rashi the candles of the *Hanukkiyah* (the Hanukkah menorah) should be a witness to the miracle that God wrought for God's people. The Hanukkah lights cannot be lit and used for personal purposes since to do so would be to obscure the purpose of the *mitzvah*—to publicize the miracle. See Shabbat 23b-2a for discussion on *pirsume nisa*—proclaiming the miracle.
2. Others suggest that the ban on using the Hanukkah lights for personal use is related to the Temple menorah. Just as the Temple menorah was a sacred light and the Menorah law forbade the functional use of its illumination, so too, the menorah lights are sacred and, consequently, the prohibition against practical use applies to them (Rashba and Ran, Shabbat 21b).
3. Rashba taught that making a personal use of the Hanukkah lights was an act of disrespect for the *mitzvah* (commandment).
4. Talmudic discussion explored the manner of the lighting of the lights. The school of Shammai (*Beit Shammai*) suggested that the order should be to decrease from eight on the first night to one on the last night while, on the other hand, *Beit Hillel* taught the order was in the reverse. The Gemara presents several rabbinic interpretations. R. Yose ba Avin said that *Beit Shammai's* teaching on decreased kindlings each night represented the number of days [of the miracle] still to come, while *Beit Hillel's* teaching that one should kindle one candle the first night and increase the number to eight over successive nights inferred the number of days already passed. R. Yose bar Zevida, on the other hand, taught that the decrease from eight to one corresponded to the decrease in bull sacrifices over the eight days of the Sukkot festival (Num. 29:12-25), while Hillel's increase from one lighting to eight was based upon the principle that "in sacred matters we elevate and do not lower the degree of sanctity" (Shabbat 21b). The *halakhab* follows Hillel—the numbers increase.
5. While there is no consensus in the Gemara [Talmudic discussion] regarding the order of the kindling of the Hanukkah lights it is agreed that the essential commandment is that **one light** should be lit in each household each night.
6. The Talmud also discusses the placement of the Hanukkah lights: by the doorway of one's house or in a window if one lives on an upper floor. The reason being that the command is to publically proclaim the miracle. However, if to do so would endanger one's household the lights should be placed on one's table indoors.

THE HANUKKIAH

The Hanukkah menorah differs from the seven lamp Temple menorah in having eight lamps. In addition the *hanukkiyah* has a ninth lamp called the *shamash* (meaning guard or servant) which, because it is not a Hanukkah light, ensures the Talmudic *halakhab* (rule) that the Hanukkah lights are solely to publicize the miracle. The *shamash* provides any illumination necessary for personal use. Some light the *shamash* first then use it to light the other candles. In this way there are two candles burning on the first night of Hanukkah (a Hanukkah light and the *shamash*), three on the second night etc.

HANUKKAH CUSTOMS

Blessings are recited on each day of the eight day festival. The blessing for the Lighting of the Hanukkah candles and the blessing for the Miracles of Hanukkah are recited on each day of the festival. The *Shebecheyanu* (*Who has given us life*) blessing is included on the first day of the festival.

The mediaeval hymn *Maoz Tzur* (Rock of Ages) which praises God for the Divine salvation and recalls persecutions in Jewish history is sung in some communities. It is customary to recite psalms (Psa. 30, 67 and 91) and other prayers, including the Hallel, and an addition to the thanksgiving benediction of the Amidah (The Daily Prayer). It is also a time to give gifts of money (*gelt*) to children, and for children to play the Dreidel game. The dreidel is a small four sided spinning top with four letters, *nun, gimmel, hey and shin*—an acronym for *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*: "A great miracle happened here."



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REFERENCES

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