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Hanukkah

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Hanukkah



A Hanukkiya or Hanukkah Menorah

Official name	Hebrew : חנוכה or חנוכה English translation: "Establishing" or "Dedication" (of the Temple in Jerusalem)
Also called	Festival of Lights, Festival of Dedication
Observed by	Jews
Type	Jewish festival
Significance	The Maccabees successfully rebelled against Antiochus IV Epiphanes . According to the Talmud , a late text, the Temple was purified and the wicks of the menorah miraculously burned for eight days, even though there was only enough sacred oil for one day's lighting.
Begins	25 Kislev
Ends	2 Tevet or 3 Tevet
2011 date	Sunset, December 20 to sunset, December 28

2012 date	Sunset, December 8 to sunset, December 16
Celebrations	Lighting candles each night. Singing special songs, such as Ma'oz Tzur . Reciting Hallel prayer. Eating foods fried in oil, such as latkes and sufganiyot , and dairy foods. Playing the dreidel game, and giving Hanukkah gelt
Related to	Purim , as a rabbinically decreed holiday.

Hanukkah ([Hebrew](#): חֲנֻכָּה, Tiberian: Ḥānukkāh, usually spelled חנוכה pronounced [χanu'ka] in [Modern Hebrew](#), also romanized as **Chanukah**, **Chanukkah**, or **Chanuka**), also known as the **Festival of Lights**, is an eight-day [Jewish holiday](#) commemorating the rededication of the [Holy Temple](#) (the [Second Temple](#)) in [Jerusalem](#) at the time of the [Maccabean Revolt](#) of the 2nd century BCE. Hanukkah is observed for eight nights and days, starting on the 25th day of [Kislev](#) according to the [Hebrew calendar](#), which may occur at any time from late November to late December in the [Gregorian calendar](#).

The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights of a unique [candelabrum](#), the nine-branched [Menorah](#) or *Hanukiah*, one additional light on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight on the final night. The typical Menorah consists of eight branches with an additional raised branch. The extra light is called a [shamash](#) ([Hebrew](#): שמש, "attendant" or "sexton")^[1] and is given a distinct location, usually above or below the rest. The purpose of the *shamash* is to have a light available for use, as using the Hanukkah lights themselves is forbidden.^[2]

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Etymology



Child lighting
Hanukkah candles

The name "Hanukkah" derives from the Hebrew verb "חנך", meaning "to dedicate". On Hanukkah, the Jews regained control of Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple.^[3]

Many homiletical explanations have been given for the name:^[4]

- The name can be broken down into חנו כ"ה, "they rested on the twenty-fifth", referring to the fact that the Jews ceased fighting on the 25th day of [Kislev](#), the day on which the holiday begins.^[5]
- חנוכה (Hanukkah) is also the Hebrew [acronym](#) for ח נרות והלכה כבית הלל — "Eight candles, and the halakha is like the House of Hillel". This is a reference to the disagreement between two rabbinical schools of thought — the [House of Hillel](#) and the [House of Shammai](#) — on the proper order in which to light the Hanukkah flames. Shammai opined that eight candles should be lit on the first night, seven on the second night, and so on down to one on the last night. Hillel argued in favor of starting with one candle and lighting an additional one every night, up to eight on the eighth night. Jewish law adopted the position of Hillel.


Historical sources

Mishna and Talmud

See also: [Mishna Omissions](#)

The story of Hanukkah, along with its laws and customs, is entirely missing from the [Mishna](#) apart from several passing references (Bikkurim 1:6, Rosh HaShanah 1:3, Taanit 2:10, Megillah 3:4 and 3:6, Moed Katan 3:9, and Bava Kama 6:6). [Rav Nissim Gaon](#) postulates in his *Hakdamah Le'mafteach Hatalmud* that information on the holiday was so commonplace that the Mishna felt no need to explain it. [Reuvein Margolies](#)^[6] suggests that as the Mishnah was redacted after the [Bar Kochba revolt](#), its editors were reluctant to include explicit discussion of a holiday celebrating another relatively recent revolt against a foreign ruler, for fear of antagonizing the Romans.



 Hanukkah lamp
unearthed near
Jerusalem about
1900

Hanukkah is described in the [Talmud](#). The [Gemara](#), in tractate *Shabbat 21*, focuses on [Shabbat](#) candles and moves to Hanukkah candles and says that after the forces of Antiochus IV had been driven from the Temple, the Maccabees discovered that almost all of the ritual olive oil had been profaned. They found only a single container that was still [sealed](#) by the [High Priest](#), with enough oil to keep the menorah in the Temple lit for a single day. They used this, yet it burned for eight days (the time it took to have new oil pressed and made ready).
[\[7\]](#)

The Talmud presents three options:

1. The law requires only one light each night per household,
2. A better practice is to light one light each night for each member of the household
3. The most preferred practice is to vary the number of lights each night.

Except in times of danger, the lights were to be placed outside one's door, on the opposite side of the [Mezuzah](#), or in the window closest to the street. [Rashi](#), in a note to *Shabbat 21b*, says their purpose is to publicize the miracle.

Narrative of Josephus



Various menorot used for Hanukkah. 12th through 19th century, CE

The ancient Jewish Historian Flavius [Josephus](#) narrates in his book Jewish Antiquities XII, how the victorious [Judas Maccabeus](#) ordered lavish yearly eight-day festivities after rededicating the Temple in Jerusalem that had been profaned by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. [Josephus](#) does not say the festival was called Hannukkah but rather the "Festival of Lights":

"Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival. Judas also rebuilt the walls round about the city, and reared towers of great height against the incursions of enemies, and set guards therein. He also fortified the city Bethsura, that it might serve as a citadel against any distresses that might come from our enemies."^[8]

Other ancient sources

The story of Hanukkah is alluded to in the book of [1 Maccabees](#) and [2 Maccabees](#). The eight day rededication of the temple is described in 1 Maccabees 4:36 *et seq*, though the name of the festival and the miracle of the lights do not appear here. A story similar in character, and obviously older in date, is the one alluded to in 2 Maccabees 1:18 *et seq* according to which the relighting of the altar fire by [Nehemiah](#) was due to a miracle which occurred on the 25th of Kislev, and which appears to be given as the reason for the selection of the same date for the rededication of the altar by Judah Maccabee.

Another source is the [Megillat Antiochus](#). This work (also known as "Megillat HaHasmonaim", "Megillat Hanukkah" or "Megillat Yevanit") is in both [Aramaic](#) and [Hebrew](#); the Hebrew version is a literal translation from the Aramaic original. Recent scholarship dates it to somewhere between the 2nd and 5th Centuries, probably in the 2nd century,^[9] with the Hebrew dating to the 7th century.^[10] It was published for the first time in [Mantua](#) in 1557. [Saadia Gaon](#), who translated it into [Arabic](#) in the 9th century, ascribed it to the Maccabees themselves, disputed by some, since it gives dates as so many years before the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE.^[11] The Hebrew text with an English translation can be found in the [Siddur](#) of [Philip Birnbaum](#).

The Christian Bible refers to Jesus being at the Jerusalem Temple during "the feast of the dedication and it was winter" in John 10:22-23.

Story of Hanukkah

Background

[Judea](#) was part of the [Ptolemaic Kingdom](#) of Egypt until 200 [BCE](#) when King [Antiochus III the Great](#) of Syria defeated King [Ptolemy V Epiphanes](#) of Egypt at the [Battle of Panium](#). [Judea](#) became at that moment part of the [Seleucid Empire](#) of Syria. King [Antiochus III the Great](#) wanting to conciliate his new Jewish subjects guaranteed their right to "live according to their ancestral customs" and to continue to practice their religion in the Temple of Jerusalem. However in 175 BCE, [Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#), the son of Antiochus III invaded Judea, ostensibly at the request of the sons of Tobias.^[12] The [Tobiads](#), who led the [Hellenizing Jewish faction](#) in Jerusalem, were expelled to Syria around 170 BCE when the high priest Onias and his pro-Egyptian faction wrested control from them. The exiled Tobiads lobbied Antiochus IV Epiphanes to recapture Jerusalem. As the ancient Jewish historian [Flavius Josephus](#) tells us "The king being thereto disposed beforehand, complied with them, and came upon the Jews with a great army, and took their city by force, and slew a great multitude of those that favored Ptolemy, and sent out his soldiers to plunder them without mercy. He also spoiled the temple, and put a stop to the constant practice of offering a daily sacrifice of expiation for three years and six months."^[13]


Traditional view

When the [Second Temple](#) in Jerusalem was looted and services stopped, [Judaism](#) was outlawed. In 167 BCE [Antiochus](#) ordered an altar to [Zeus](#) erected in the Temple. He banned circumcision and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the temple.^[14] Antiochus's actions provoked a large-scale revolt. [Mattityahu](#), a [Jewish priest](#), and his five sons [Jochanan](#), [Simeon](#), [Eleazar](#), [Jonathan](#), and [Judah](#) led a rebellion against Antiochus. Judah became known as Yehuda HaMakabi ("Judah the Hammer"). By 166 BCE Mattathias had died, and Judah took his place as leader. By 165 BCE the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid monarchy was successful. The Temple was liberated and rededicated. The festival of Hanukkah was instituted to celebrate this event.^[15] Judah ordered the Temple to be cleansed, a new altar to be built in place of the polluted one and new holy vessels to be made. According to the Talmud, olive oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn throughout the night every night. The story goes that there was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the menorah. An eight day festival was declared by the Jewish sages to commemorate this miracle.

The version of the story in 1 Maccabees states that an eight day celebration of songs and sacrifices was proclaimed upon re-dedication of the altar, and makes no mention of the miracle of the oil.^[16] A number of historians believe that the reason for the eight day celebration was that the first Hanukkah was a belated celebration of [Sukkot](#) and [Shemini Atzeret](#).^[17] During the war the Jews were not able to celebrate these festivals, when lamps were lit in the Temple (Suk.v. 2–4).

Modern scholarship



 [US Navy](#) personnel light candles on Hanukkah

Some modern scholars argue that the king was intervening in an internal [civil war](#) between the traditionalist Jews and the Hellenized Jews in Jerusalem. [\[18\]](#)[\[19\]](#)[\[20\]](#)[\[21\]](#)

These competed violently over who would be the [High Priest](#), with traditionalists with Hebrew/Aramaic names like [Onias](#) contesting with Hellenizing High Priests with Greek names like [Jason](#) and [Menelaus](#).[\[22\]](#) In particular Jason's Hellenistic reforms would prove to be a decisive factor leading to eventual conflict within the ranks of Judaism.[\[23\]](#) Other authors point to possible socioeconomic reasons in addition to the religious reasons behind the civil war.[\[24\]](#)

What began in many respects as a civil war escalated when the Hellenistic kingdom of Syria sided with the [Hellenizing Jews](#) in their conflict with the traditionalists. [\[25\]](#) As the conflict escalated, Antiochus took the side of the Hellenizers by prohibiting the religious practices the traditionalists had rallied around. This may explain why the king, in a total departure from Seleucid practice in all other places and times, banned a traditional religion.[\[26\]](#)

Hanukkah rituals



 [Public Hanukkah menorah](#) in [Donetsk, Ukraine](#)

Hanukkah is celebrated by a series of rituals that are performed every day throughout the 8-day holiday, some are family-based and others communal. There are special additions to the daily prayer service, and a section is added to the blessing after meals. Hanukkah is not a "Sabbath-like" holiday, and there is no obligation to refrain from [activities that are forbidden on the Sabbath](#), as specified in the *Shulkhan Arukh*.[\[27\]](#) Adherents go to work as usual, but may leave early in order to be home to kindle the lights at nightfall. There is no religious reason for schools to be closed, although, in Israel, schools close from the second day for the whole week of Hanukkah. Many families exchange gifts each night, and fried foods are eaten.

Kindling the Hanukkah lights



[Latkes](#), a traditional Hanukkah food

The single light each night for eight nights. As a universally practiced "beautification" of the [mitzvah](#), the number of lights lit is increased by one each night.^[28] An extra light called a *shamash*, meaning "attendant" or "sexton,"^[1] is also lit each night, and is given a distinct location, usually higher, lower, or to the side of the others. The purpose of the extra light is to adhere to the prohibition, specified in the Talmud (Tracate Shabbat 21b–23a), against using the Hanukkah lights for anything other than publicizing and meditating on the Hanukkah story. This differs from [Sabbath](#) candles which are meant to be used for illumination. Hence, if one were to need extra illumination on Hanukkah, the *shamash* candle would be available and one would avoid using the prohibited lights. Some light the *shamash* candle first and then use it to light the others.^[29] So all together, including the *shamash*, two lights are lit on the first night, three on the second and so on, ending with nine on the last night, for a total of 44 (36, excluding the *shamash*).

The lights can be candles or oil lamps.^[29] Electric lights are sometimes used and are acceptable in places where open flame is not permitted, such as a hospital room. Most Jewish homes have a special [candelabrum](#) or oil lamp holder for Hanukkah, which holds eight lights plus the additional *shamash* light.

The reason for the Hanukkah lights is not for the "lighting of the house within", but rather for the "illumination of the house without," so that passersby should see it and be reminded of the holiday's miracle. Accordingly, lamps are set up at a prominent window or near the door leading to the street. It is customary amongst some Ashkenazim to have a separate menorah for each family member (customs vary), whereas most Sephardim light one for the whole household. Only when there was danger of [antisemitic persecution](#) were lamps supposed to be hidden from public view, as was the case in [Persia](#) under the rule of the [Zoroastrians](#), or in parts of Europe before and during World War II. However, most [Hasidic](#) groups light lamps near an inside doorway, not necessarily in public view. According to this tradition, the lamps are placed on the opposite side from the [mezuzah](#), so that when one passes through the door he is surrounded by the holiness of *mitzvoth*.

Generally women are exempt in Jewish law from time-bound positive commandments, however the Talmud requires that women engage in the mitzvah of lighting Hanukkah candles "for they too were involved in the miracle."^[30]

Candlelighting time

Hanukkah lights should burn for at least one half hour after it gets dark. The custom of the [Vilna Gaon](#) observed by many residents of Jerusalem as the custom of the city, is to light at sundown, although most Hassidim light later, even in Jerusalem. Many Hasidic Rebbes light much later, because they fulfill the obligation of publicizing the miracle by the presence of their Hasidim when they kindle the lights. Inexpensive small wax candles sold for Hanukkah burn for approximately half an hour, so on most days this requirement can be met by lighting the candles when it is dark outside. Friday night presents a problem, however. Since candles may not be lit on the [Shabbat](#) itself, the candles must be lit before sunset. However, they must remain lit until the regular time—thirty minutes after nightfall—and inexpensive Hanukkah candles do not burn long enough to meet the requirement. A

simple solution is to use longer candles, or the traditional oil lamps. In keeping with the above-stated prohibition, the Hanukkah menorah is lit first, followed by the Shabbat candles which signify its onset.

Blessings over the candles

Typically three blessings (*Brachot* singular *Brachah*) are recited during this eight-day festival. On the first night of Hanukkah, Jews recite all three blessings; on all subsequent nights, they recite only the first two.^[31] The blessings are said before or after the candles are lit depending on tradition. On the first night of Hanukkah one light (candle, lamp, or electric) is lit on the right side of the Menorah, on the following night a second light is placed to the left of the first candle and so on, proceeding from right to left over the eight nights. On each night, the leftmost candle is lit first, and lighting proceeds from left to right.

For the full text of the blessings, see [List of Jewish prayers and blessings: Hanukkah](#).

Hanerot Halalu

During or after the lights are kindled the hymn *Hanerot Halalu* is recited. There are several differing versions; the version presented here is recited in many Ashkenazic communities:^[32]

Ashkenazi version:

Transliteration

Hanneirot hallalu anachnu madlikin 'al hannissim ve'al hanniflaot 'al hatteshu'ot ve'al hammilchamot she'asita laavoteinu bayyamim haheim, (u)bazzeman hazeh 'al yedei kohanekha hakkedoshim. Vekhol-shemonat yemei Hanukkah hanneirot hallalu kodesh heim, ve-ein lanu reshut lehishtammesh baheim ella lir'otam bilvad kedei lehodot ul'halleil leshimcha haggadol 'al nissekha ve'al nifleotekha ve'al yeshu'otekha.

English

We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your [holy priests](#). During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations.

Maoz Tzur

Each night after the lighting of the candles, the hymn [Ma'oz Tzur](#) is sung. The song contains six stanzas. The first and last deal with general themes of divine salvation, and the middle four deal with events of persecution in [Jewish history](#), and praises God for survival despite these tragedies ([the exodus](#) from Egypt, the [Babylonian captivity](#), the miracle of the holiday of [Purim](#), and the [Hasmonean](#) victory).

Other customs



[Dreidels](#) / [Spinning tops](#) in a Jerusalem market

After lighting the candles and Ma'oz Tzur, singing other Hanukkah songs is customary in many Jewish homes. Some [Hasidic](#) and [Sephardi](#) Jews recite [Psalms](#), such as Psalms 30, 67, and 91. In North America and in Israel it is common to exchange presents or give children presents at this time. In addition, many families encourage their children to give [tzedakah](#) in lieu of presents for themselves.

Special additions to daily prayers

An addition is made to the "*hoda'ah*" (thanksgiving) benediction in the [Amidah](#), called *Al ha-Nissim* ("On/about the Miracles").^[33] This addition refers to the victory achieved over the Syrians by the Hasmonean Mattathias and his sons.

The same prayer is added to the grace after meals. In addition, the [Hallel](#) Psalms are sung during each morning service and the [Tachanun](#) penitential prayers are omitted. The Torah is read every day in the [synagogue](#), the first day beginning from [Numbers](#) 6:22 (according to some customs, Numbers 7:1), and the last day ending with Numbers 8:4. Since Hanukkah lasts eight days it includes at least one, and sometimes two, [Jewish Sabbaths](#) (Saturdays). The weekly [Torah portion](#) for the first Sabbath is almost always [Miketz](#), telling of [Joseph's](#) dream and his enslavement in [Egypt](#). The [Haftarah](#) reading for the first Sabbath Hanukkah is [Zechariah](#) 2:14–4:7. When there is a second Sabbath on Hanukkah, the [Haftarah](#) reading is from [I Kings](#) 7:40–50. The Hanukkah *menorah* is also kindled daily in the synagogue, at night with the blessings and in the morning without the blessings. The menorah is not lit on the Sabbath, but rather prior to the beginning of the Sabbath at night and not at all during the day. During the [Middle Ages](#) "[Megillat Antiochus](#)" was read in the [Italian synagogues](#) on Hanukkah just as the [Book of Esther](#) is read on [Purim](#). It still forms part of the liturgy of the [Yemenite Jews](#).^[10]

Zot Hanukkah

The last day of Hanukkah is known as *Zot Hanukkah*, from the verse read on this day in the synagogue (Numbers 7:84, *Zot Chanukat Hamizbe'ach*, "This was the dedication of the altar"). According to the teachings of [Kabbalah](#) and [Hasidism](#), this day is the final "seal" of the High Holiday season of [Yom Kippur](#), and is considered a time to repent out of love for God. In this spirit, many Hasidic Jews wish each other *Gmar chatimah tovah* ("may you be sealed totally for good"), a traditional greeting for the Yom Kippur season. It is taught in Hasidic and Kabbalistic literature that this day is particularly auspicious for the fulfillment of prayers.

Symbolic importance

"We thank You also for the miraculous deeds and for the redemption and for the mighty deeds and the saving acts wrought by You, as well as for the wars which You waged for our ancestors in ancient days at this season. In the days of the Hasmonean Mattathias, son of Johanan the high priest, and his sons, when the iniquitous Greco-Syrian kingdom rose up against Your people Israel, to make them forget Your Torah and to turn them away from the ordinances of Your will, then You in your abundant mercy rose up for them in the time of their trouble, pled their cause, executed judgment, avenged their wrong, and delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and insolent ones into the hands of those occupied with Your Torah. Both unto Yourself did you make a great and holy name in Thy world, and unto Your people did You achieve a great deliverance and redemption. Whereupon your children entered the sanctuary of Your house, cleansed Your temple, purified Your sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courts, and appointed these eight days of Hanukkah in order to give thanks and praises unto Your holy name."

Translation of *Al ha-Nissim*



Photo Courtesy the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

US President [Jimmy Carter](#) attends Menorah Lighting, [Lafayette Park, Washington, D.C.](#), 1979

The classical rabbis downplayed the military and nationalistic dimensions of Hanukkah, and some even interpreted the emphasis upon the story of the miracle oil as a diversion away from the struggle with empires that had led to the disastrous downfall of Jerusalem to the Romans. With the advent of Zionism and the state of Israel, these themes were reconsidered. In modern Israel, the national and military aspects of Hanukkah became, once again, more dominant.

In North America especially, Hanukkah gained increased importance with many Jewish families in the latter half of the 20th century, including large numbers of [secular Jews](#), who wanted a Jewish alternative to the [Christmas](#) celebrations that often overlap with Hanukkah. Though it was traditional among Ashkenazi Jews to give "gelt" or money coins to children during Hanukkah, in many families this has changed into gifts in order to prevent Jewish children from feeling left out of the Christmas gift giving.

While Hanukkah is a relatively minor Jewish holiday, as indicated by the lack of religious restrictions on work other than a few minutes after lighting the candles, in North America, Hanukkah has taken a place equal to Passover as a symbol of Jewish identity. Both the Israeli and North American versions of Hanukkah emphasize resistance, focusing on some combination of national liberation and religious freedom as the defining meaning of the holiday.

Hanukkah music

Main article: [Hanukkah music](#)

A large number of songs have been written on Hanukkah themes, perhaps more so than for any other Jewish holiday. Some of the best known are "*Hanukkiah Li Yesh*" ("I Have a Hanukkah Menora"), "*Ocho Kandelikas*" ("Eight Little Candles"), "*Kad Katan*" ("A Small Jug"), "*S'vivon Sov Sov Sov*" ("Dreidel, Spin and Spin"), "*Haneirot Halolu*" ("These Candles which we light"), "*Mi Yimalel*" (Who can Retell") and "*Ner Li, Ner Li*" ("I have a Candle"). The most well known in English-speaking countries include "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel" and "Chanukah, Oh Chanukah".

Hanukkah foods



[Sufganiyot / doughnuts](#) at a Jerusalem bakery

There is a custom of eating foods fried or baked in oil (preferably [olive oil](#)) to commemorate the miracle of a small flask of oil keeping the flame in the Temple alight for eight days. Traditional foods include [potato pancakes](#), known as *latkes* in [Yiddish](#), especially among [Ashkenazi](#) families. Sephardi, [Polish](#) and [Israeli](#) families eat jam-filled [doughnuts](#) ([Yiddish](#): פאנטשקעס *pontshkes*), [bimuelos](#) (fritters) and [sufganiyot](#) which are [deep-fried](#) in oil. Bakeries in Israel have popularized many new types of fillings for *sufganiyot* besides the traditional strawberry jelly filling, including chocolate cream, vanilla cream, caramel, cappucino and others.^[34] In recent years, downsized, "mini" sufganiyot containing half the calories of the regular, 400-to-600-calorie version have become popular.^[35] There is also a tradition of eating cheese products on Hanukkah recorded in rabbinic literature. This custom is seen as a commemoration of the involvement of Judith and women in the events of Hanukkah.

Dreidel



Dreidel with the [gimel](#) side up

The [dreidel](#), or *sevivon* in Hebrew, is a four-sided spinning top that children play with on Hanukkah. Each side is imprinted with a Hebrew letter. These letters are an acronym for the Hebrew words נס גדול היה שם (*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*, "A great miracle happened there"), referring to the miracle of the oil that took place in the [Beit Hamikdash](#).

- נ ([Nun](#))
- ג ([Gimel](#))
- ה ([Hey](#))
- ש ([Shin](#))

On dreidels sold in Israel, the fourth side is inscribed with the letter פ ([Pe](#)), rendering the acronym נס גדול היה פה (*Nes Gadol Haya Po*, "A great miracle happened here"), referring to the fact that the miracle occurred in the land

of Israel. Stores in [Haredi](#) neighbourhoods sell the traditional *Shin* dreidels as well.

Some Jewish commentators ascribe symbolic significance to the markings on the dreidel. One commentary, for example, connects the four letters with the four exiles to which the nation of Israel was historically subject: Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. ^[36]

After lighting the Hanukkah menorah, it is customary in many homes to play the dreidel game: Each player starts out with 10 or 15 coins (real or of chocolate), nuts, raisins, candies or other markers, and places one marker in the "pot." The first player spins the dreidel, and depending on which side the dreidel falls on, either wins a marker from the pot or gives up part of his stash. The code (based on a [Yiddish](#) version of the game) is as follows:

- Nun–*nisht*, "nothing"—nothing happens and the next player spins
- Gimel–*gants*, "all"—the player takes the entire pot
- Hey–*halb*, "half"—the player takes half of the pot, rounding up if there is an odd number
- Shin–*shtel ayn*, "put in"—the player puts one marker in the pot

Another version differs:

- Nun–*nim*, "take"—the player takes one from the pot
- Gimel–*gib*, "give"—the player puts one in the pot
- Hey–*halb*, "half"—the player takes half of the pot, rounding up if there is an odd number
- Shin–*shtil*, "still" (as in "stillness")—nothing happens and the next player spins

The game may last until one person has won everything.

The dreidel is believed to commemorate a game devised by the Jews to camouflage the fact that they were [studying Torah](#), which was outlawed by Greeks. The Jews would gather in caves to study, posting a lookout to alert the group to the presence of Greek soldiers. If soldiers were spotted, the Jews would hide their scrolls and spin tops, so the Greeks thought they were gambling, not learning. ^[citation needed]

Hanukkah gelt



[Chocolate gelt](#)

[Hanukkah gelt](#) ([Yiddish](#) for "money") is often distributed to children to enhance their enjoyment of the holiday. The amount is usually in small coins, although grandparents or other relatives may give larger sums as an official Hanukkah gift. In Israel, Hanukkah gelt is known as *dmei Hanukkah*. Many Hasidic [Rebbes](#) distribute coins to those who visit them during Hanukkah. Hasidic Jews consider this to be an auspicious blessing from the Rebbe, and a [segulah](#) for success. Rabbi Abraham P. Bloch has written, "The tradition of giving money (Chanukah gelt) to children is of long standing. The custom had its origin in the seventeenth-century practice of Polish Jewry to give money to their small children for distribution to their teachers. In time, as children demanded their due, money was also given to children to keep for themselves. Teen-age boys soon came in for their share. According to [Magen Avraham](#) (18th cent.), it was the custom for poor yeshiva students to visit homes of Jewish benefactors who dispensed Chanukah money (Orach Chaim 670). The rabbis approved of the custom of giving money on Chanukah because it publicized the story of the miracle of the oil."^[37] 20th century [American chocolatiers](#) picked up on the gift/coin concept by creating [chocolate gelt](#).

Judith and Holofernes

The eating of dairy foods, especially cheese, on Hanukkah is a minor custom that has its roots in the story of Judith. The [deuterocanonical](#) book of [Judith](#) (Yehudit or Yehudis in Hebrew), which is not part of the [Tanach](#), records that, [Holofernes](#), an Assyrian general, had surrounded the village of Bethulia as part of his campaign to conquer Judea. After intense fighting, the water supply of the Jews is cut off and the situation became desperate. Judith, a pious widow, told the city leaders that she had a plan to save the city. Judith went to the Assyrian camps and pretended to surrender. She met Holofernes, who was smitten by her beauty. She went back to his tent with him, where she plied him with cheese and wine. When he fell into a drunken sleep, Judith beheaded him and escaped from the camp, taking the severed head with her (the [beheading of Holofernes by Judith](#) has historically been a popular theme in art). When Holofernes' soldiers found his corpse, they were overcome with fear; the Jews, on the other hand, were emboldened, and launched a successful counterattack. The town was saved, and the Assyrians defeated. [\[38\]](#)

Alternative spellings

חנוכה

Spelling variations due to transliteration of Hebrew *Chet Nun Vav Kaf Hey*

In [Hebrew](#), the word Hanukkah is written [חנוכה](#) or [הניכה](#) (Hănukkâh). It is most commonly transliterated to English as *Chanukah* or *Hanukkah*, the former because the sound represented by "CH" ([χ], similar to the [Scottish](#) pronunciation of "[loch](#)") does not exist in the English language. Furthermore, the letter "[chet](#)" ([ח](#)), which is the first letter in the Hebrew spelling, is pronounced differently in modern Hebrew ([voiceless uvular fricative](#)) than in classical Hebrew ([voiceless pharyngeal fricative](#)), and neither of those sounds is unambiguously representable in English spelling. Moreover, the 'kaf' consonant is [geminate](#) in classical (but not modern) Hebrew. Adapting the classical Hebrew pronunciation with the geminate and pharyngeal Heth can lead to the spelling "Hanukkah"; while adapting the modern Hebrew pronunciation with no gemination and uvular Heth leads to the spelling "Chanukah".

In *Simple*(6,74) *English*(7,74) *Gematria*(8,74) there are two codes being dealt with: [1] the number of letters in a word, name, or phrase is significant, i.e. Hanukkah(8)/Chanukah(8) and *Passover*(8) are each an eight-day(8) festival(8) and [2] the sum of the most basic letter-number substitution is significant using *the key*(74) of A=1...Z=26, i.e. Jewish=74 Hanukkah=75 Menorah=74.

Historic timeline



[Biala Rebbe](#) lights the menorah

- 198 BCE: Armies of the Seleucid King [Antiochus III](#) (Antiochus the Great) oust [Ptolemy V](#) from Judea and Samaria.
- 175 BCE: [Antiochus IV](#) (Epiphanes) ascends the Seleucid throne.
- 168 BCE: Under the reign of Antiochus IV, the Temple is looted, Jews are massacred, and [Judaism](#) is outlawed.
- 167 BCE: Antiochus orders an altar to [Zeus](#) erected in the Temple. Mattathias, and his five sons John, Simon, Eleazar, Jonathan, and Judah lead a rebellion against Antiochus. Judah becomes known as Judah Maccabe (Judah The Hammer).
- 166 BCE: Mattathias dies, and Judah takes his place as leader. The [Hasmonean](#) Jewish Kingdom begins; It lasts until 63 BCE
- 165 BCE: The Jewish revolt against the [Seleucid](#) monarchy is successful. The Temple is liberated and rededicated (Hanukkah).
- 142 BCE: Establishment of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. The Seleucids recognize Jewish autonomy. The Seleucid kings have a formal overlordship, which the Hasmoneans acknowledged. This inaugurates a period of great geographical expansion, population growth, and religious, cultural and social development.
- 139 BCE: The [Roman Senate](#) recognizes Jewish autonomy.
- 134 BCE: [Antiochus VII Sidetes](#) besieges [Jerusalem](#). The Jews under [John Hyrcanus](#) become Seleucid vassals, but retain religious autonomy.^[39]
- 129 BCE: Antiochus VII dies.^[40] The [Hasmonean](#) Jewish Kingdom throws off Syrian rule completely
- 96 BCE: An eight year civil war begins.
- 83 BCE: Consolidation of the Kingdom in territory east of the [Jordan River](#).
- 63 BCE: The Hasmonean Jewish Kingdom comes to an end because of rivalry between the brothers [Aristobulus II](#) and [Hyrcanus II](#), both of whom appeal to the [Roman Republic](#) to intervene and settle the power struggle on their behalf. The Roman general [Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus](#) (Pompey the Great) is dispatched to the area. 12 thousand Jews are massacred as Romans enter Jerusalem. The Priests of the Temple are struck down at the Altar. Rome annexes Judea.

Battles of the Maccabean revolt



Tombs of the Maccabees, [Modi'in](#), [Israel](#)

Key battles between the [Maccabees](#) and the Seleucid Syrian-Greeks:

- [Battle of Adasa](#) ([Judas Maccabeus](#) leads the Jews to victory against the forces of Nicanor.)
- [Battle of Beth Horon](#) (Judas Maccabeus defeats the forces of Seron.)
- [Battle of Beth-zachariah](#) (Elazar the Maccabee is killed in battle. Lysias has success in battle against the Maccabees, but allows them temporary freedom of worship.)
- [Battle of Beth Zur](#) (Judas Maccabeus defeats the army of [Lysias](#), recapturing Jerusalem.)
- [Dathema](#) (A Jewish fortress saved by Judas Maccabeus.)
- [Battle of Elasa](#) (Judas Maccabeus dies in battle against the army of [King Demetrius](#) and [Bacchides](#). He is succeeded by [Jonathan Maccabaeus](#) and [Simon Maccabaeus](#) who continue to lead the Jews in battle.)
- [Battle of Emmaus](#) (Judas Maccabeus fights the forces of [Lysias](#) and [Georgias](#)).
- [Battle of Wadi Haramia](#).

Dates

Further information: [Jewish holidays 2000–2050](#)

The dates of Hanukkah are determined by the [Hebrew calendar](#). Hanukkah begins at the 25th day of [Kislev](#) and concludes on the 2nd or 3rd day of [Tevet](#) (Kislev can have 29 or 30 days). The Jewish day begins at sunset, whereas the [Gregorian calendar](#) begins the day at midnight. Hanukkah begins on sunset of the date listed.

- December 20, 2011
- December 8, 2012
- November 27, 2013
- December 16, 2014
- December 6, 2015
- December 24, 2016
- December 12, 2017
- December 2, 2018
- December 22, 2019
- December 10, 2020

Hanukkah in the White House



President [Harry S. Truman](#) in the [Oval Office](#), receiving a Hanukkah Menorah as a gift from the Prime Minister of Israel, [David Ben-Gurion](#) (center). To the right is [Abba Eban](#), the Ambassador of Israel to the United States.

Main article: [White House Hanukkah Party](#)

The United States has a history of recognizing and celebrating Hanukkah in a number of ways, from menorah lighting ceremonies to a 1996 postage stamp, jointly issued with Israel, to special receptions in the White House (although the United States has not had any Jewish presidents).

One of the earliest links with the White House occurred in 1951, when Israeli Prime Minister [David Ben-Gurion](#) presented United States President [Harry Truman](#) with a Hanukkah Menorah. But it was not until 1979 that a sitting president, [Jimmy Carter](#) took part in a public Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony on the [National Mall](#), followed by the first Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony in the [White House](#) itself, led by President [Bill Clinton](#).

In 2001, President [George W. Bush](#) held an official Hanukkah reception in the White House in conjunction with the candle-lighting ceremony, and since then this ceremony has become an annual tradition attended by Jewish leaders from around the country. In 2008, George Bush linked the occasion to the 1951 gift by using that menorah for the ceremony, with a grandson of Ben-Gurion and a grandson of Truman lighting the candles.

Green Hanukkah

Some Jews in North America and Israel have taken up environmental concerns in relation to Hanukkah's "miracle of the oil", emphasizing reflection on [energy conservation](#) and [energy independence](#). An example of this is the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life's renewable energy campaign. ^[41]^[42]^[43]

See also



- [Hanukkah bush](#)
- [Hasmonean kingdom](#)
- [Hellenistic Judaism](#)
- [Jewish holidays](#)

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