



# Celebrating Hanukkah

Jewish Family Living – Holiday Celebrations at Home  
Congregation Beth El ♦ Bethesda, MD

## Hanukkah – Rededicating Ourselves

In the year 167 BCE, Israel was ruled by a Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus IV), who, in a fit of jealousy of the Jews' loyalty to the God of Israel, banned the practice of Judaism in his kingdom. Jews were forbidden to pray, circumcise their sons, learn Hebrew, study Torah, observe their holidays, or offer sacrifices in the Temple; instead, they were supposed to adopt many of the Greek practices popular in the Seleucid Empire. While some Jews converted to the ways of Hellenism, others, called zealots, shut themselves off from the attractions of Hellenism and maintained their Jewish practices secretly. Most Jews, however, neither rejected Judaism nor chose the more stringent path of the zealots. Instead, they outwardly embraced the visible symbols of Hellenism – for example, building altars to Greek Gods outside their homes – yet remained faithful to their Judaism in their hearts.

As anti-Jewish efforts and decrees were made by the Syrians, a dedicated Jewish family known as the Hasmoneans (or Maccabees) began to mount a revolt. For three years, Mattathias and his sons led the Jews in battles against the Syrians. In the beginning their army was small, but as their numbers grew, so did their power. After winning many small victories, the Maccabees waged and won the most important battle of all: the fight for Jerusalem. Having regained control of Jerusalem, the Jews immediately went to the Temple, destroyed all items installed by the Syrians, and cleaned out the halls and courtyards. They rededicated the Temple to God and to the Jewish people, giving the Festival of Lights its name: Hanukkah, the Hebrew word for “rededication.”



Legend has it that during the massive cleaning of the Temple, the Jews found a cruse of consecrated olive oil, the only type allowed to burn in the Temple. There was enough oil inside to burn for only one day, and to everyone's wonder, it lasted for eight days and eight nights. Other explanations for the length of the holiday of Hanukkah relates to a story of the Hasmoneans celebrated the fall festival holiday of Sukkot after the rededication of the Temple, as they were not able to celebrate a few months earlier due to the fighting and the desecration of the Temple. Just as Sukkot lasts eight days, so, too, was Hanukkah established in kind.

Starting on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Kislev, Hanukkah gives us the opportunity to proclaim the miracle of the Temple restoration – whether it was the miracle of a small army overthrowing the much larger Syrian forces or the miracle of the long-last cruse of oil – through the lighting of candles. When we light the candles of Hanukkah we publicly celebrate the Festival of Lights, placing our *chanukiyot* on window sills for all to see.

## Home Guide for Celebrating Hanukkah

Most of the more popular rituals of Hanukkah are practiced at home. The following is a step-by-step guide for home observance of Hanukkah. It includes information on traditional and symbolic foods to incorporate into your celebration of the holiday, prayers to recite during the holiday, and some ideas for family activities during this festive time.



## Lighting the Hanukkah Candles

Each night of Hanukkah begins with the lighting of the *chanukiyah*, the special eight-branched *menorah* used for the Festival of Lights. On the first night, place one candle on the right side of the *chanukiyah*, as well as one *shamash*, or “helper” candle, in its place. After the candles are lit, make sure to let them burn until they extinguish themselves.

Each successive night of Hanukkah, add another candle to your *chanukiyah*, placing them from right to left. By the last night of Hanukkah, your *chanukiyah* will be filled with candles. When you light the candles using the *shamash*, do so from left to right.

Once the *shamash* is lit, the blessings are recited. The candles are then lit, beginning with the newest and continuing down the line from left to right.

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam,  
Asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav,  
V'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Chanukah.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק  
נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe whose mitzvot add holiness to our lives  
and who gave us the mitzvah to kindle lights for Hanukkah.

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam,  
She'asah nisim la'avoteinu bayamim  
Hahem baz'man hazeh.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים  
הָהֵם בְּזַמַּן הַזֶּה.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who accomplished miracles for our ancestors in  
ancient days and in our time

**\*\* The Shehecheyanu blessing is recited only on the first night of Hanukkah. \*\***

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam,  
Shehecheyanu v'kimanu v'higi-anu laz'man  
hazeh.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁהַחַיָּנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזַמַּן הַזֶּה.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, for keeping us alive, for sustaining us,  
and for helping us to reach this season.

**Special note:** On the Friday night of Hanukkah, we recite the blessings and light the Hanukkah candles *before* lighting Shabbat candles, and on Saturday evening, we light them immediately *after* Shabbat, after reciting Havdalah.

## FAMILY ACTIVITIES FOR HANUKKAH



### Food

It is tradition to eat food cooked in oil during Hanukkah as a way to remind ourselves of the legend of the long-lasting cruse of oil found during the big Temple clean-up. Popular options include potato pancakes (*latkes* in Yiddish) and jelly donuts (*sufganiyot* in Hebrew). Find recipes together and do a *latke* or *sufganiyot* taste test!

### Gifts

It has become tradition to give gifts to each other during Hanukkah. Have fun with these gifts – give Jewish books to each other to remember the Hasmoneans who fought against oppression to protect their Judaism.



Some families choose one evening during Hanukkah where they do not give gifts to each other; instead, they choose an organization everyone agrees upon and, instead of spending money on gifts, they give a donation instead. Similarly, go shopping together for gifts that can be donated – food can be donated to a food bank, articles of clothing can be donated to a number of different organizations. Doing acts of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) together as a family can make your Hanukkah even more meaningful.



### Play Dreidel

While the dreidel game might have originated as a German gambling game, it holds the central meaning of Hanukkah within the four walls of the dreidel (or *s'vivon*) in Hebrew.

Start with an equal number of pieces between each person – these can be candy, chocolate coins (*gelt*), pennies, or something else. Before each round, have each participant put one item into the “pot.” Each player gets a turn to spin the dreidel. If it lands on:



*Nun*, the player gets nothing

*Hey*, the player gets half the pot

*Gimmel*, the player gets everything, and then everyone else puts in one.

*Shin*, the player puts one into the pot

### Hanukkah Music

There are so many Hanukkah songs available online, in stores, on iTunes... a list could go on forever! Find albums to play or make your own playlist – a little music enlivens a holiday dinner or party!

This guide was prepared by Elisha Rothschild Frumkin, Family Education Director at Congregation Beth El, with help from: [Rediscovering the Jewish Holidays](#) by Nina Beth Cardin and Gila Gevirtz, [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com), and [Teaching Jewish Holidays](#) by Robert Goodman. Prayer excerpts are from [Siddur Sim Shalom](#) and [B'kol Echad](#) published by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.