

Spirituality for Children

(ages 8 to 14 and all ages everywhere)

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Series I - The Foundation

Unit 5: Religious Holy Days

Lesson 3 - **Hannukkah** (Jewish - 12/25 - 1/1)

Taken from the Wikipedia article on Hannukkah - refer to the various topics on-line for more information

Hanukkah is a **Jewish holiday** commemorating the rededication of the **Holy Temple** (the **Second Temple**) in **Jerusalem** at the time of the **Maccabean Revolt** against the **Seleucid Empire**. 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**. It is also known as the **Festival of Lights** and the **Feast of Dedication**.



Menorah

The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights of a unique **candelabrum**, the nine-branched **menorah** (also called a *Chanukiah/ 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 visually distinct branch. The extra light, with which the others are lit, is called a **shamash** (**Hebrew**: שמש),

"attendant") and is given a distinct location, usually above or below the rest. Other Hanukkah festivities include playing [dreidel](#) and eating oil-based foods such as doughnuts and [latkes](#). Since the 1970s, the worldwide [Chabad Hasidic](#) movement has initiated public menorah lightings in open public places in many countries.

The miracle of the one-day supply of oil miraculously lasting eight days is first described in the [Talmud](#), committed to writing about 600 years after the events described in the books of Maccabees.

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)

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.

Traditional view

When the [Second Temple](#) in Jerusalem was looted and services stopped, [Judaism](#) was outlawed. In 167 BC, [Antiochus](#) ordered an altar to [Zeus](#) erected in the Temple. He banned [brit milah](#) (circumcision) and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the temple.

Antiochus's actions provoked a large-scale [revolt](#). [Mattathias](#) (Mattityahu), a [Jewish priest](#), and his five sons [Jochanan](#), [Simeon](#), [Eleazar](#), [Jonathan](#), and [Judah](#) led a rebellion against Antiochus starting with Mattathias killing first a Jew who wanted to comply with Antiochus's order to sacrifice to Zeus and then a Greek official who was to enforce the government's behest (1 Mac. 2, 24-25).

Judah became known as Yehuda HaMakabi ("Judah the Hammer"). By 166 BC Mattathias had died, and Judah took his place as leader. By 165 BC 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. 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, unadulterated and undefiled pure olive oil with the seal of the [kohen gadol](#) (high priest) was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn throughout the night every night. The story goes that one flask was found with only enough oil to burn for one day, yet it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of [kosher](#) 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 specific mention of the miracle of the oil.

Hanukkah is celebrated with 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*.^[40] 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, such as books or games, and "Hanukkah Gelt" is often given to children. Fried foods (such as latkes [potato pancakes](#), jelly doughnuts [sufganiyot](#), and Sephardic Bimuelos) are eaten to commemorate the importance of oil during the celebration of Hanukkah. Some also have a custom to eat dairy products to remember [Judith](#) and how she overcame [Holofernes](#) by feeding him cheese, which made him thirsty and giving him wine to drink. When Holofernes became very drunk, Judith [cut off his head](#). The holiday's miracle is the triumph of the few over the many and of the pure over the impure.

Hanukkah lights should usually burn for at least half an hour after it gets dark. The custom of many is to light at sundown, although most Hasidim light later. Many Hasidic [Rebbs](#) light much later to 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 should be lit no earlier than nightfall. Friday night presents a problem, however. Since candles may not be lit on [Shabbat](#) itself, the candles must be lit before sunset. However, they must remain lit through the lighting of the Shabbat candles. Therefore, the Hanukkah menorah is lit first with larger candles than usual, followed by the [Shabbat candles](#). At the end of the Shabbat, there are those who light the Hanukkah lights before [Havdalah](#) and those who make Havdalah before the lighting Hanukkah lights.^[54]

If for whatever reason one didn't light at sunset or nightfall, the lights should be kindled later, as long as there are people in the streets. Later than that, the lights should still be kindled, but the blessings should be recited only if there is at least somebody else awake in the house and present at the lighting of the Hannukah lights.

Blessings over the candles

Typically three blessings are recited during this eight-day festival when lighting the candles:

On the first night of Hanukkah, Jews recite all three blessings; on all subsequent nights, they recite only the first two.

The blessings are said before or after the candles are lit depending on tradition. On the first night of Hanukkah one light (candle or oil) is lit on the right side of the menorah, on the following night a second light is placed to the left of the first but it is lit first, and so on, proceeding from placing candles right to left but lighting them from left to right over the eight nights.



Dreidel

The [dreidel](#), or *sevivon* in Hebrew, is a four-sided spinning top that children play with during Hanukkah. Each side is imprinted with a Hebrew letter.

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

These letters are an abbreviation for the Hebrew words היה גדול נס שם (*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*, "A great miracle happened there"), referring to the miracle of the oil that took place in the [temple](#).

On dreidels sold in Israel, the fourth side is inscribed with the letter פ ([Pe](#)), rendering the acronym פה היה גדול נס (*Nes Gadol Haya Po*, "A great miracle happened here"), referring to the fact that the miracle occurred in the land of Israel, although this is a relatively recent innovation. Stores in [Haredi](#) neighborhoods sell the traditional *Shin* dreidels as well, because they understand "there" to refer to the Temple and not the entire Land of Israel, and because the Hasidic Masters ascribe significance to the traditional letters.

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.

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. If there are an odd number of markers, usually the player takes the extra one too.
- *Shin-shtel ayn*, "put in"-the player puts one marker in the pot

The game may last until one person has won everything.

Tradition has it that the reason the dreidel game is played is to commemorate a game devised by the Jews to camouflage the fact that they were studying Torah, which was outlawed by the Seleucids. The Jews would gather in caves to study, posting a lookout to alert the group to the presence of Seleucid soldiers. If soldiers were spotted, the Jews would hide their scrolls and spin tops, so the Seleucids thought they were gambling, not studying.

The historical context may be from the time of the Bar-Kohba war, 132-135 C.E. when the penalty for teaching Torah was death, so decreed by Rome..

- In North America especially, Hanukkah gained increased importance with many Jewish families in the latter part of the 20th century, including among 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 to children during Hanukkah, in many families this has been supplemented with other gifts so that Jewish children can enjoy gifts just as their Christmas-celebrating peers do.
- 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 in the 21st century 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.

Reflection For Deeper Understanding

I. Meditation

Sit on the floor with your legs crossed or in a chair with your feet on the floor. Don't cross your ankles or sit with your feet straight out. Let your hands lie quietly in your lap, palms up. Take a few deep breaths and feel the air move through your body. Continue breathing deeply until you feel your body relax. Now close your eyes and focus on the stillness inside. Let your thoughts float by when

they appear. Don't follow them, just let them go. See them drifting away like in a bubble or a balloon in the breeze.

Imagine you're a Maccabean rebel and are experiencing total restrictions on what you believe and say and how you live. Your central place of worship has been shut down and all religious teachings have been forbidden under penalty of death. You are living under foreign occupation and have no rights in your own homeland. Feel the frustration and fear in yourself, your family and in your community. You have finally had enough and join together with your neighbors and friends to take control back from the foreign rulers. Feel the relief and happiness at winning your independence once again and re-establishing your own way of life in your own land. You are grateful for being able to once again worship God in your own way and openly teach your children what you believe. Sit for a few moments and experience this sense of freedom to be who you are.

2-3 minutes of silence

Return now to your breath and take a few deep breaths to bring you back into the room. Feel your body on the chair, your feet on the floor. Move your arms and legs, and when you feel like it open your eyes. Many Blessings. (ring the bell)

II. Contemplate and Research the following questions - ask yourself, your parents, other adults, your friends, look it up on the internet or find it in a book. Make sure you understand the ideas:

1. Do you have any Jewish friends? How do they celebrate Hannukkah? Or How does your school or community celebrate Hannukkah?
2. What is the historical reference to Hannukkah? How is it seen as a miracle?
3. Have you ever played with Dreidels? How was the dreidel important as a resistance tool?
4. Is there a *Temple* in Jerusalem now? Why or why not?
5. Look up the following 15 words in a dictionary:
 - a. *Hannukkah*

- b. *Seleucids*
- c. *Maccabean Revolt / Book of Maccabees*
- d. *Menorah*
- e. *Shamash*
- f. *Miracle*
- g. *Talmud*
- h. *Torah*
- i. *Sealed*
- j. *Profane*
- k. *Shabbat*
- l. *Recite*
- m. *Commemorate*
- n. *Restrictions*
- o. *Resistance*

III. Activities

1. Look up **Maccabean Revolt** on-line and make sure that you understand its importance to Jews and Judaism. What were they fighting for and what did they win?
2. Ask your parents to go to a large toy store to find and purchase a dreidel. Go home and play using coins/candy as the "pot". Is it a fun game? Why or why not?
3. Why is the Middle East so important economically, religiously and politically especially to the West (Europe and North America)?

IV. Reference Materials

1. The Big Religion Chart: www.RELIGIONFACTS.com
2. A map of the world: e.g. www.aphgmorey.com/uploads/2/1/1/0/21103464/world_political_map.jpg.
3. World Religion Terminology
4. Wikipedia