

CONGREGATION ALBERT CHANUKAH INFORMATION

THE STORY OF CHANUKAH



The Hebrew word Chanukah means "dedication" and refers to the joyous eight-day celebration through 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.

In the year 168 B.C.E., the Syrian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes sent his soldiers to Jerusalem. The Syrians desecrated the Temple, and Antiochus declared that Judaism was to be abolished. The only options he offered Jews were conversion or death. Altars and idols were set up throughout Judea for the purpose of worshipping Greek gods. Antiochus outlawed the observance of Shabbat, the festivals, and circumcision.

On the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev in 168 B.C.E., the Temple was renamed for the Greek god Zeus. Pigs were sacrificed in the Temple. The Torah was spattered with pigs' blood and then burned. Thousands of Jews chose to die rather than commit idolatry. Among these martyrs was a woman named Hannah who, with her seven sons, defied the Syrian decree.

But slowly a resistance movement developed against the cruelty of Antiochus, led by a priestly family known as the Hasmoneans or Maccabees. The head of the family was an elderly man named Mattathias. He and his five sons left Jerusalem and took up residence in a small town north of Jerusalem, called Modi'in. When Syrian soldiers appeared in the town and commanded the inhabitants to offer sacrifices to Zeus, Mattathias and his sons refused. Mattathias killed one Jew who began to sacrifice to Zeus, and his sons then turned upon the Syrian troops and slew them.

It was a turning point in the struggle. The Maccabees became instant folk heroes. Fleeing to the hills with their followers, they conducted a campaign of guerilla warfare against the occupying Syrian forces. Mattathias's son, Judah, known as "The Hammer," became the chief strategist and military leader.

Furious, Antiochus decided to destroy the people of Judea. He sent a large army, with instructions to kill every man, woman, and child. Though outnumbered, Judah Maccabee and his fighters miraculously won two major battles, routing the Syrians decisively. By 165 B.C.E., the terror of Antiochus had ended. The Jews had won a victory for their land and their faith.

The idols were torn down, and, on the morning of the 25th day of Kislev in 165 B.C.E., the Temple in Jerusalem was reconsecrated - three years to the day after its original defilement. In celebration, the people of Jerusalem lit bright lights in front of their homes and decided to mark their deliverance with an annual eight-day festival. It was called the Feast of Lights, the Feast of Dedication, or simply Chanukah.

Originally, the eight-day Feast of Lights was intended to parallel the eight days of Sukkot. The books of Maccabees made no mention of the beautiful legend concerning the jar of oil which has come to be so much a part of Chanukah. It was several centuries later (500 C.E.) that the story of the cruse of oil emerged as part of the Talmud.

The legend relates that when the Maccabees entered the Temple and began to cleanse it, they immediately relit the Ner Tamid, or Eternal Light. A single jar of oil remained, which was sufficient for only one day. The messenger who was sent to secure additional oil took eight days to complete his mission. But, miraculously, the single cruse of oil continued to burn for eight days. The rabbis of the Talmud, therefore, attributed the eight days of Chanukah to the miracle of the little jar of oil.

We continue the ancient customs related to Chanukah today, commemorating the liberation of our people and their affirmation of human dignity and freedom of religion. In Jewish homes throughout the world, the eve of the 25th of Kislev begins an eight-day celebration involving many joyous customs and ceremonies.

The Dreidel

The most popular of all Chanukah activities has always been the dreidel. As the name from the German "drehen," to spin, implies, this is a spinning top (in Hebrew, "sivivon"). This top was popular in medieval Germany; its letters in Latin characters: N-nisht (nothing); G-ganz (all); H-halb (half) and S-shtel (put), were transferred to popular Jewish script and usage. Symbolically, the top recalls the "turnover" of events when Judah the Maccabee's few forces vanquished and toppled the many in Antiochus' army. The natural sequence of events was overturned: the strong were spun into the hands of the weak, as enunciated in the "Al Ha'nissim" prayer of Chanukah.



Some historians interpret the game as a disguised form of studying. When the Jews were not allowed to engage in the study of the Law, they would assemble to play the game and at the same time discuss the Law orally.

A dreidel is a spinning top with four sides.

There are four letters: *NUN* נ, *GIMMEL* ג, *HEH* ה, and *SHIN* ש on each of the four sides. The four letters represent the words "A great miracle happened there." To play dreidel, each player should bring with an equal number of candies, raisins, nuts, or pennies. Each player puts one candy in the center. The players then take turns spinning the dreidel.

If the dreidel lands on the *NUN* - נ, the player gets nothing.

If the dreidel lands on the *SHIN* - ש, the player puts one candy in the center.

If the dreidel lands on the *HEH* - ה, the player wins half the candies in the center.

If the dreidel lands on the *GIMMEL* - ג, the player wins all the candies in the center.

After landing on *GIMMEL* - ג, each player again puts one candy in the center.

The game will end after a certain amount of gimmels, or until one player has won all the candies, or it can last indefinitely!