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HANUKKAH

The Story of Hanukkah

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, also called the Festival of Lights, dates back 2,500 years. It is celebrated in November or December of each year.



In the second century B.C.E. (before the Common Era), Antiochus, King of Syria, ruled over the land of Israel as part of his huge empire. Antiochus demanded that everyone in his empire worship the ancient Greek gods, just like he did.

Many people obeyed, but the Jews did not.

This made the king angry. He had a huge statue of Zeus (Jupiter) brought into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and ordered the Jews to worship it.

The Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament) forbids Jews to worship statues or idols. But some Jews were afraid to disobey the king and did as he commanded.

One family, the Hasmoneans (a father and his 5 sons), refused to give up their Jewish religion and worship pagan gods. They urged their fellow Jews to rebel against the Syrians and take back the Temple.

The men who joined the rebellion called themselves the *Maccabees* (meaning 'the hammers') because they planned to give the Syrians a real pounding.

The rebellion lasted three years. At first, the rebels were only a small group living in caves, but gradually their numbers grew, and so did their strength.

After 3 years of war, the Maccabees finally recaptured Jerusalem (and the Temple) from the Syrians. But the Temple was practically in ruins.

The Jews first had to clean and repair the Temple. When they were finished they removed the Greek statues and re-dedicated the Temple to God. This is how Hanukkah got its name—Hanukkah means 'dedication' in Hebrew (the language spoken by the Jews).

The Jews dedicated the Temple by lighting a special lamp—called a Menorah. The Menorah was a symbol of God's presence, and it was *never* supposed to go out.

There was only one small jar of oil with which to light the Menorah—enough to keep it burning for just one day. It would take at least a week to make more oil. But the Jews went ahead and lit the Menorah anyway, trusting that somehow the oil would last until more was prepared.

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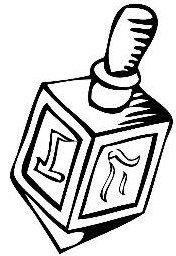
Miraculously, the Menorah continued to burn—with just that one small jar of oil—for eight whole days and nights, right up until the new oil was ready.

The Jews declared an eight day festival to celebrate this miracle and to give thanks for their victory over the Syrians.

Today, Jews celebrate Hanukkah by lighting a small menorah (called a Hanukiah) in their homes. The Hanukiah holds eight candles. One candle is lit on the first night of the festival, and another candle is added each night for eight nights.



People sing songs, dance, and eat latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts) cooked in oil. Children get gifts of chocolate wrapped in foil to look like gold coins. They use this 'money' to play a game—called Dreidel—where they spin a little top to see how much they win or lose.



This year (2021), Hanukkah began on Sunday night, November 28, and will last until Monday night, December 6.