

## Hanukkah History

Around 200 B.C., Judea—also known as the Land of Israel—came under the control of Antiochus III, the Seleucid king of Syria, who allowed the Jews living there to continue practicing their religion. His son, Antiochus IV, was less benevolent. He outlawed the Jewish religion and ordered the Jews to worship Greek gods. In 168 B.C.E., the city's Holy Second Temple was seized by soldiers, desecrated, and dedicated to the worship of the god Zeus. This upset the Jewish people, but many were afraid to fight back.



In the village of Modi'in, near Jerusalem, Greek soldiers forcibly gathered the Jewish villagers and told them to bow down to an idol and then eat the flesh of a pig – both practices that are forbidden to Jews. Led by the Jewish priest Mattathias, a large-scale rebellion broke out against Antiochus. When Mattathias died in 166 B.C., his son, Judah Maccabee (The Hammer), took charge. Within two years, the Jews had succeeded in retaking their land, relying largely on guerilla warfare tactics. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the Second Temple and rebuild its altar. Hanukkah, which means "dedication" in Hebrew, commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Since they were unable to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot at its proper time in early autumn, the victorious Maccabees decided that Sukkot should be celebrated after they rededicated the Temple, which they did on the 25th of the month of Kislev in the year 164 B.C.E. Judah called on his followers to light its menorah—the gold candelabrum, with its seven branches representing knowledge and creation, and were meant to be kept burning every night.



According to the Talmud, Judah Maccabee and the other Jews who took part in the rededication of the Second Temple witnessed what they believed to be a miracle. Even though there was only enough untainted olive oil to keep the menorah's candles burning for a single day, the flames continued flickering for eight nights, leaving time to find a fresh supply. This is the miracle of the Hanukkah oil that is celebrated every year when Jews light a special menorah known as a hanukkiyah for eight days.



The contemporary observance of Hanukkah features the lighting of the hanukkiyah, a menorah with eight branches plus a ninth holder for the shamash, or helper candle.

On the first night of Hanukkah, two candles are placed in the menorah. One serves as the shamash to be used for lighting the other candle. On each successive night, another candle is added to the menorah. By the last night of Hanukkah, eight candles are glowing brightly in celebration.

Other familiar Hanukkah customs include spinning the dreidel (a special top with Hebrew letters on the sides), eating potato latkes (pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly donuts), and giving gifts of gelt (coins) to children.



In Jewish tradition, Hanukkah is considered a minor holiday. It is not a holy day, like Rosh Hashanah or Passover. Hanukkah is a happy, fun-filled celebration.