

Wishing a very Happy Hanukkah to everyone who is celebrating!

This year, Hanukkah began at nightfall on November 28th and ends at nightfall on December 6th. Hanukkah falls on a different day each year as the Hebrew calendar is based on the lunar cycle. Hanukkah, which is also spelled “Chanukah” is an eight-day winter festival commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and subsequent rededication of the Second Temple at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt. Also known as the Feast of Dedication or the feast of the Maccabees, it was instated by Judas Maccabees in 165 BCE.

The term Hanukkah means “inauguration” or “dedication.” It has both religious and nonreligious components to its celebration. Nonreligious customs associated with Hanukkah, including festive meals, songs, games, and gifts to children. Potato pancakes (latkes), doughnuts (*sufganiyot*), and other treats fried in oil, which recall the miracle of the oil, are popular. Children receive presents and gifts of money (Hanukkah gelt), which is sometimes distributed in the form of chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil. Card playing is common, and children play a game with a four-sided top called a dreidel (Hebrew *sevivon*). On each side of the top is a Hebrew letter, which forms the initials of the words in the phrase *nes gadol haya sham*, meaning “a great miracle happened there.” In modern Israel the letters of the dreidel were changed to reflect the translation “a great miracle happened here.” In countries where Christmas rituals are widespread, some echoes of those rituals appear in Hanukkah celebrations. Some families, for example, exchange gifts or decorate their homes.

One of the most important customs, which is well known those who do not celebrate, is the lighting of the Menorah. The Menorah is a candelabra with eight branches accompanied by a holder for the shamash (servant) candle that is used to light the other eight candles. The miracle of Hanukkah is that only one vial of oil was found with just enough oil to illuminate the Temple lamp for one day, and yet it lasted for eight full days.



Sources:

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