Celebrating Hanukkah

Summary

Hanukkah isn't a Biblical Holy Day — but it is a real piece of Israelite history worth understanding on its own terms.

- Hanukkah framed as a historically-rooted commemorative "Holy Event," not a Yahweh-commanded Biblical Holy Day.
- The Maccabean revolt against the pagan ruler Antiochus Epiphanes (165 BC).
- The Temple's desecration and rededication.
- The traditional symbols: the menorah, dreidel, latkes, and gelt.

The full article begins on the next page.

Celebrating Hanukkah



Most of the world considers Hanukkah *(HA-noo-ka)* to be a "Jewish" holiday, however it is properly a Holy "Event", celebrated in commemorative manner by people of the Hebrew faith, which coincidentally includes "Jews" (Jews are NOT descendants of the tribe of Judah). Hanukkah is not specifically set forth in the Bible by name or as a Yahweh-appointed Holy Day, but the events that are celebrated at Hanukkah are indeed "Holy", inasmuch as they are directly related to Bible prophecy.

It is celebrated in late November or early December. The exact date is determined according to the Hebrew calendar. Hanukkah falls on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the Hebrew people over King Antiochus Epiphanes, a pagan tyrant from Greece, who tried to destroy the Hebrew faith in 165 BC. It also celebrates the rededication of the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem. To understand Hanukkah, you must be familiar with the history behind it.

Prior to the reign of Antiochus, the Hebrews lived in relative peace under various rulers and kings. Though their rulers changed, their lives were generally unaffected. One tradition that was particularly significant to their culture involved going to their Temple in Jerusalem. They called their Temple "The House of Yahweh" and it was considered a very sacred place. It was decorated with many precious objects. Among those precious items was a lamp that burned continuously, symbolizing the enduring Hebrew faith.

However, when Antiochus came to power, he placed many burdens upon the Hebrews. They had to pay high taxes and he tried to force them to replace their Biblical laws and traditions with Greek ones. He even forced the Hebrews to take a new high priest, Menelaus. The new high priest began to steal from the Temple and send precious gold and silver to Antiochus. This made the Hebrews angry. While Antiochus

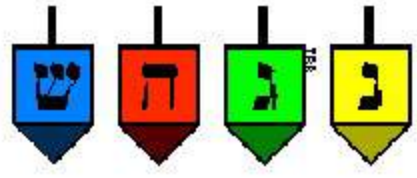
was fighting a war in Egypt, a small army of Hebrew soldiers surrounded the temple to force Menelaus out.

Fearing that the Hebrews were rising up against him, when Antiochus returned, he caused his army to storm the Temple. They tore down the city walls and stripped the Temple of anything they could carry. The soldiers placed a Greek idol upon the golden altar and allowed pigs to run within the sacred grounds. Hebrews were threatened with death if they refused to worship the new idols. The soldiers drank the holy water and set fire to books containing holy writings. Amongst all the chaos, the oil in the lamp was spilled and the light in the Temple went out.

Because Antiochus had his army storm the Temple on the Sabbath, the Hebrews wouldn't fight back. Thousands were either killed or carried off and sold as slaves. However, later, a man named Mattathias refused to obey the king's men. He took his five sons and others who would follow him into the mountains where they planned how they might regain their right to worship as they pleased. King Antiochus sent an army after them, but they were unsuccessful in defeating Mattathias and his men. Under the direction of Mattathias and then later his son, Judah, ordinary farmers and shepherds learned to fight like brave soldiers. Judah was nicknamed Maccabee, meaning "the hammer" because of the way he fought King Antiochus' men.

Finally, after many battles, the king's army was beaten by Judah's men. Hebrew people, including modern Jews consider this to be the first miracle of Hanukkah.

The Maccabees, another name for Judah's army, returned to Jerusalem where they found their Temple abandoned and defiled. The sight made them very sad, but they immediately set forth to cleanse and rebuild the Temple. When it came time for its rededication, Judah and his men looked for oil to re-light the lamp, but they could only find enough for the lamp to burn for one day. However, the lamp continued to burn for eight days and nights until more oil was made. They considered this to be the second miracle of Hanukkah. The Hebrew people as well as those that call themselves Jews have continued to celebrate Hanukkah ever since.





Symbols that are associated with the celebration of Hanukkah include the menorah *(meh NOAR-uh)*, dreidels *(DRAY-dels)*, potato latkes, and gelt. The menorah is a special candelabrum that holds nine candles. The middle candle is called the shammash *(SHAHM-mahs)* or server candle because it is used to light the other candles. It usually stands a little bit higher than the others. Candles are lit after sundown on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah. On the first night the server candle is lit as well as the first candle on the far right. On the seven succeeding nights another candle is added from right to left until all eight candles are lit. The family member who lights the Hanukkah candles recites traditional blessings. The menorah represents the miracle of the lamp burning for eight days on barely enough oil for one.

A dreidel is a small top with four sides. Each side is marked with a Hebrew letter *(nun, gimel, hey, and shin)*. The letters stand for "A Great Miracle Happened There," referring to the two miracles of Hanukkah. There are many variations of this game that children enjoy playing as they celebrate Hanukkah.

Potato latkes, similar to pancakes, are a traditional food eaten around Hanukkah time. They are generally made by combining grated potatoes, eggs, onions, flour, and salt. Then they are deep-fried in oil to symbolize the lamp that burned for eight days when it only had enough oil for one.

Gelt is Hanukkah money. In many homes, children are given gifts and Hanukkah gelt, which may be used in dreidel games.

← Return to the Articles Index