



Connecting Our Faiths
Temple Shalom
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Hanukkah – A Brief introduction

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1. Hanukkah is not mentioned in **Jewish Scriptures**, neither in the Torah nor in the rest of the Hebrew Bible
 - a. It is not a **biblical holiday**, not a major holiday but a rather minor one.
 - b. No **prohibition of labor** and no obligation to **prepare the house**, or wear **elegant clothing**.
 - c. No **elaborately choreographed rituals**.
2. It is an **eight day holiday** which is characterized by the **lighting of candles**, preferably where they can be seen by the greatest number of people. One candle on the first night, two on the second night, etc. Candles are lit in a candelabrum called a **menorah**. An additional candle is used to light the others, and it also has a place in the menorah, separated from the candles designating the specific day of the holiday.
 - a. Recommended to have some **celebratory meals**. Customary to have **fried foods** like potato pancakes and doughnuts and dairy products.
 - b. Nice to **sing songs** at the meals.
 - c. We play games, especially with a small top called a **dreidel**.
 - d. Conduct intellectual **classes and discussions** about the meaning of the holiday, especially its modern relevance.
3. The holiday commemorates a certain historical event in the **middle of the 2nd century** before the common era.
 - a. The Jews of the Land of Israel had come under the control of Alexander the Great of Macedonia. After his death the Land of Israel was ruled by the Syrian branch of the empire, the Seleucids, whose king was **Antiochus the 4th**.
 - b. **Hellenization** became enshrined in law. The Jews were forced to give up the commandments of the Torah under pain of death. The **Temple** in Jerusalem was desecrated; pig was offered on its altar and a statue of Zeus was set up in its courtyard.

i. **First Book of the Maccabees chapter 1**

57Whoever was found with a scroll of the covenant, and whoever observed the Torah, was condemned to death by royal decree.

58 So they used their power against Israel, against those who were caught, each month, in the cities.

60 In keeping with the decree, they put to death women who had their children circumcised,

61 and they hung their babies from their necks; their families also and those who had circumcised them were killed.

62 But many in Israel were determined and resolved in their hearts not to eat anything unclean;

63 they preferred to die rather than to be defiled with food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die.

- c. The Jews refused to abandon their religion and revolted. Led by the family of the **Maccabees**, they mustered an army and defeated the Greeks. The **Temple** was cleansed and dedicated anew and an **independent Jewish state** was established. The Jews were freed to practice their religion.

- i. **First Book of the Maccabees chapter 2**

23 As he finished saying these words, a certain Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein according to the king's order.

24 When Mattathias saw him, he was filled with zeal; his heart was moved and his just fury was aroused; he sprang forward and killed him upon the altar.

25 At the same time, he also killed the messenger of the king who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar.

26 Thus he showed his zeal for the Torah, just as Phinehas did with Zimri, son of Salu.

27 Then Mattathias cried out in the city, "Let everyone who is zealous for the Torah and who stands by the covenant follow me!"

28 Then he and his sons fled to the mountains, leaving behind in the city all their possessions.

- d. Later sources bring a story of a **miracle** that occurred at the dedication of the Temple. This is the source of the particular custom of lighting candles for each of the eight days. It is also the source of the custom of eating foods fried in oil. But the original historical sources and the prayers said during the holiday do not mention this miracle, but only the military, **political victory**.

- i. **Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 21b**

What is [the reason of] Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

ii. **‘These Lights’ (prayer recited every night immediately upon lighting the Hanukkah lights)**

We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your holy priests. During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations.

4. There is a second narrative told in relation to the holiday, which is recounted in a number of versions – the story of **Judith**.
 - a. She seduced the enemy general and got him drowsy with a combination of wine and **milk**. She then chopped off his head.
 - b. That is the source for the custom of eating dairy products on the holiday.
5. There is a third narrative, which is closer to the **historical truth**.
 - a. Many of the Jews of the time were actually **active Hellenizers**, and advocated abandoning Judaism and adopting the religion and customs of the modern cosmopolitan Greek world. It was they who encouraged the Greek overlords to impose Hellenism on the Jewish masses. The Maccabean revolt was just as much as **civil war** among the Jews as it was an effort to throw off foreign oppression.

i. **Second Book of the Maccabees chapter 4**

10 When Jason received the king’s approval and came into office, he immediately initiated his compatriots into the Greek way of life.

11 He set aside the royal concessions granted to the Jews through the mediation of John, father of Eupolemus ... he set aside the Torah practices and introduced customs contrary to the Torah.

12 With perverse delight he established a gymnasium at the very foot of the citadel, where he induced the noblest young men to wear the Greek hat.

13 The craze for Hellenism and the adoption of foreign customs reached such a pitch, through the outrageous wickedness of Jason, the renegade and would-be high priest,

14 that the priests no longer cared about the service of the altar. Disdaining the temple and neglecting the sacrifices, they hastened, at the signal for the games, to take part in the unlawful exercises at the arena.

15 What their ancestors had regarded as honors they despised; what the Greeks esteemed as glory they prized highly.

First Book of the Maccabees, chapter 1

11 In those days there appeared in Israel transgressors of the Torah who seduced many, saying: “Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles all around us; since we separated from them, many evils have come upon us.”

12 The proposal was agreeable to them;

13 some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the ordinances of the Gentiles.

14 Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom.

15 They undid their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant; they allied themselves with the Gentiles and gave themselves over to wrongdoing.

41 Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people,

42 and abandon their particular customs. All the Gentiles conformed to the command of the king,

43 and many Israelites delighted in his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath.

52 Many of the people, those who abandoned the Torah, joined them and committed evil in the land.

ii. At the time of the Maccabean victory, **Jewish observance was forced** upon the entire Jewish population.

b. Many of the non Hellenizing Jews of the time were at least originally against the revolt, but rather advocated passive **martyrdom**.

i. The rebellion represented an **activist** understanding of Judaism that become dominant.

6. Lessons of Hanukah

a. Triumph of **traditional religious commitment**

as over against assimilation into the prevailing universalist culture

b. Triumph of **political self-determination**

as over against the imperialism of the world power

c. Triumph of an **activist religious approach** that teaches that it is incumbent upon man to struggle against evil

as over against a passivist religious approach that leaves man to accept God's decree, even if that means martyrdom

d. Affirmation of the centrality of the **Jerusalem Temple**

e. Struggle with the legacy of **civil war and theocracy**

f. Struggle with a **one dimensional view of women** that sees them through a purely sexual lense