

Chanukah



Level: Basic

On the 25th of Kislev are the days of Chanukah, which are eight... these were appointed a Festival with Hallel [prayers of praise] and thanksgiving. ([Shabbat 21b](#), [Babylonian Talmud](#))

Sunset Dec 7, 2023 - Nightfall Dec 15, 2023

Significance: Remembers the rededication of the Temple after it was defiled by the Greeks

Observances: Lighting candles

Length: 8 days

Customs: eating fried foods; playing with a dreidel (top)

Chanukah, the Jewish festival of rededication, also known as the festival of lights, is an eight day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of [Kislev](#).

Chanukah is probably one of the best known Jewish holidays, not because of any great religious significance, but because of its proximity to Christmas. Many non-Jews (and even many assimilated Jews!) think of this holiday as the Jewish Christmas, adopting many of the Christmas customs, such as elaborate gift-giving and decoration. It is bitterly ironic that this holiday, which has its roots in a revolution against assimilation and the suppression of Jewish religion, has become the most assimilated, secular holiday on our calendar.

The Story

The story of Chanukah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered Syria, Egypt and Phoenicia, but allowed the lands under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this relatively benevolent rule, many Jews assimilated much of Hellenistic culture, adopting the language, the customs and the dress of the Greeks, in much the same way that Jews in America today blend into the secular American society.

More than a century later, a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV was in control of the region. He wanted uniformity in his Empire and began to oppress the Jews who did not conform severely, placing a Hellenistic priest in the [Temple](#), massacring Jews, prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion, and desecrating the Temple by requiring the sacrifice of pigs (a non-[kosher](#) animal) on the altar. Two groups opposed Antiochus: a basically nationalistic group led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and his son Judah Maccabee, and a religious traditionalist group known as the Chasidim, the forerunners of the [Pharisees](#) (no direct connection to the modern movement known as [Chasidism](#)). They joined forces in a revolt against both the assimilation of the Hellenistic Jews and oppression by the Seleucid Greek government. The revolution succeeded and the Temple was rededicated.

According to tradition as recorded in the [Talmud](#), on page [Shabbat 21b](#), at the time of the rededication, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the [menorah](#) (candelabrum) in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. There was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet miraculously, it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the menorah. An eight day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle. Note that the holiday commemorates the miracle of the oil, not the military victory: Jews do not glorify war.

...At least, that's what the rabbis of the Talmud say. but they may not have entirely approved of the Hasmoneans of later days. Mattathias's descendants became the ruling dynasty of Judea, but the monarchy was reserved for descendants of King David of the tribe of [Judah](#), The Hasmoneans were [kohanim](#) (priests), descendants of [Aaron](#) of the tribe of [Levi](#), so this entire monarchy violated the biblical principle of separation of church and state. The Hasmonean dynasty fell in about 100 years, leaving Judea in the hands of the Romans. So you see why the rabbis would rather focus on the miracle of the oil than the military victory of the Hasmoneans.

≡ Traditions

Our rabbis taught the rule of Chanukah: ... on the first day one [candle] is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased ... [because] we increase in sanctity but do not reduce. ([Shabbat 21b](#), Babylonian Talmud)

Chanukah is not a very important religious holiday. The holiday's religious significance is far less than that of [Rosh Hashanah](#), [Yom Kippur](#), [Sukkot](#), [Passover](#), and [Shavu'ot](#). It is roughly equivalent

to [Purim](#) in significance, and you won't find many non-Jews who have even heard of Purim! Chanukah is not mentioned in [Jewish scripture](#); the story is related in the book of Maccabees, which Jews do not accept as scripture.

[Menorah from Amazon.com](#) The only religious observance related to the holiday is the lighting of candles. The candles are arranged in a candelabrum called a menorah (or sometimes called a chanukiah) that holds nine candles: one for each night, plus a shammas (servant) at a different height. On the first night, one candle is placed at the far right. The shammas candle is lit and three [berakhot](#) (blessings) are recited: l'hadlik neir (a general prayer over candles), she-asah nisim (a prayer thanking G-d for performing miracles for our ancestors at this time), and she-hekhianu (a general prayer thanking G-d for allowing us to reach this time of year). See [Chanukah Candle Lighting Blessings](#) for the full text of these blessings. After reciting the blessings, the first candle is then lit using the shammas candle, and the shammas candle is placed in its holder. Candles can be lit any time after dark but before midnight. The candles are normally allowed to burn out on their own after a minimum of 1/2 hour, but if necessary they can be blown out at any time after that 1/2 hour. On [Shabbat](#), Chanukah candles are normally lit before the Shabbat candles, but may be lit any time before candlelighting time (18 minutes before sunset). Candles cannot be blown out on Shabbat (it's a violation of the sabbath rule against igniting or extinguishing a flame). Because the Chanukah candles must remain burning until a minimum of 1/2 hour after dark (about 90 minutes total burning time on Shabbat), some Chanukah candles won't get the job done. On one of the earlier nights, you might want to make sure your candles last long enough. If they don't, you might want to use something else for Chanukah on Shabbat, such as tea lights or even Shabbat candles.

Each night, another candle is added from right to left (like the [Hebrew](#) language).

Candles are lit from left to right (because you pay honor to the newer thing first).

On the eighth night, all nine candles (the 8 Chanukah candles and the shammas) are lit. See animation at right for the candlelighting procedure. On nights after the first, only the first two blessings are recited; the third blessing, she-hekhianu is only recited on the first night of holidays.



Why the shammas candle? The Chanukah candles are for pleasure only; we are not allowed to use them for any productive purpose. We keep an extra one around (the shammas), so that if we need to do something useful with a candle, we don't accidentally use the Chanukah candles. The shammas candle is at a different height so that it is easily identified as the shammas.

It is traditional to eat fried foods on Chanukah because of the significance of oil to the holiday. Among [Ashkenazic](#) Jews, this usually includes latkes (pronounced "lot-kuhs" or "lot-keys" depending on where your grandmother comes from. Pronounced "potato pancakes" if you are a [goy](#).) My [recipe](#) is included later in this page.

Gift-giving is not a traditional part of the holiday, but has been added in places where Jews have a lot of contact with Christians, as a way of dealing with our children's jealousy of their Christian friends. It is extremely unusual for Jews to give Chanukah gifts to anyone other than their own young children. The only traditional gift of the holiday is "gelt," small amounts of money.

Another tradition of the holiday is playing dreidel, a gambling game played with a square top. Most people play for matchsticks, pennies, M&Ms or chocolate coins. The traditional explanation of this game is that during the time of Antiochus' oppression, those who wanted to study [Torah](#) (an illegal activity) would conceal their activity by playing gambling games with a top (a common and legal activity) whenever an official or inspector was within sight.



A dreidel is marked with four [Hebrew letters](#): Nun (נ), Gimel (ג), Hei (ה) and Shin (ש). These letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham" (נֵס גָּדוֹל הָיָה שָׁם), a great miracle happened there, referring to the miracle of the oil.

The letters also stand for the [Yiddish](#) words nit (nothing), gantz (all), halb (half) and shtell (put), which are the rules of the game! There are some variations in the way people play the game, but the way I learned it, everyone puts in one coin. A person spins the dreidel. If it lands on Nun, nothing happens; on Gimel (or, as we called it as kids, "gimme!"), you get the whole pot; on Hei, you get half of the pot; and on Shin, you put one in (in addition to the one everyone puts in for the next round). Keep playing until one person has everything. Then redivide it, because nobody likes a poor winner.

☰ Chanukah Music

☰ Ma'oz Tzur (Rocky Fortress)



The lyrics of this song date back to approximately the 13th century C.E. It is believed to be written by a man named Mordecai, because that name is encrypted in the first letters of the five stanzas. The music dates back to at least the 18th century, and possibly as far back as the 15th century. Most people are only familiar with the first stanza, which is reproduced below. This very literal translation is not what most people are used to seeing (it is usually translated as "Rock of Ages").

Hebrew ([Transliterated](#))

Literal Translation

Ma'oz tzur y'shuati

Rocky Fortress of my Salvation

L'kha na-eh l'shabei-ach

It is delightful to praise You

Tikon beyt t'filati

Restore my House of Prayer

V'sham todah n'zabei-ach

And there we will give thanks with an offering

L'eit tachin matbei-ach

When you have prepared the slaughter

Mitzar ha-m'nabei-ach

for the blaspheming foe

Az egmor b'shir mizmor

Then I will complete with a song of hymn

Chanukat ha-mizbei-ach

the dedication of the altar

Az egmor b'shir mizmor

Then I will complete with a song of hymn

Chanukat ha-mizbei-ach

the dedication of the altar

A less literal but popular and more singable translation (not quite the translation used by the Maccabeats above):

Rock of Ages, let our song, Praise Thy saving power

Thou amidst the raging foes, Wast our sheltering tower

Furious they assailed us, But Thine arm availed us

And thy word broke their sword, When our own strength failed us.

And thy word broke their sword, When our own strength failed us.

≡ Mi Y'maleil? (Who Can Retell?)



Although my translation below is not quite literal, it's the closest thing to a literal translation I've been able to find. For some reason, this popular Chanukah song is usually translated with great liberties. The YouTube video is sung with an authentic Israeli accent, and may sound a little different than the way Americans are used to hearing it.

Hebrew (Transliterated)	Translation
Mi y'maleil g'vurot Yisrael	Who can tell of the feats of Israel
Otan mi yimneh?	Who can count them?
Hen b'khol dor yakum hagibor, go-el ha-am.	In every age a hero arose to save the people.
Mi yemalel g'vurot Yisra-el	Who can tell of the feats of Israel
Otan mi yimneh?	Who can count them?
Hen b'khol dor yakum hagibor, go-el ha-am.	In every age a hero arose to save the people.
Sh'ma! Ba-yamim ha-heim ba-z'man hazeh	Hear! In those days at this time
Maccabee moshiya u'fodeh	Maccabee saved and freed us
U'v'yameinu kol am Yisrael	And in our days the whole people of Israel
Yitacheid yakum l'higa-el.	Arise united to save ourselves.

A popular less literal but more singable translation:

Who can retell the things that befell us, who can count them?
 In every age a hero or sage came to our aid
 Who can retell the things that befell us, who can count them?
 In every age a hero or sage came to our aid

Hear! In days of yore in Israel's ancient land
 Maccabeus led the faithful band
 Now all Israel must as one arise
 Redeem itself through deed and sacrifice

☰ Chanukah, Oh Chanukah



There are many variations on this popular Chanukah tune. I've provided singable versions in both English and [Yiddish](#). The lyrics of these two versions don't really correspond to each other, (and the YouTube video has yet another slightly different version!) but all versions speak of the fun of the secular trappings of the holiday, with slight reference to the religious aspects.

Yiddish ([Transliterated](#))

English

Chanukah, O Chanukah

Chanukah, Oh Chanukah

A yontev a sheyner

Come light the menorah

A lustiger a freylicher

Let's have a party

Nishto noch azoyner

We'll all dance the hora

Ale nacht mit dreydl shpiln mir

Gather round the table, we'll have a treat

Zudigheyse latkes esn mir

Shiny tops to play with, latkes to eat

Geshvinder tsindt kinder

And while we are playing

Di dininke lichtelech on

The candles are burning low

Zogt "al ha-nisim," loybt G-t far di nisim

One for each night, they shed a sweet light

Un kumt gicher tantsn in kon

To remind us of days long ago

☰ Candlelight



No list of Chanukah songs would be complete without a link to the Maccabeats' brilliant music video, Candlelight, a parody of Taio Cruz's "Dynamite" that tells the story of Chanukah. The [Maccabeats](#) are an a cappella group from [Yeshiva University](#), so you know they'll get all the details right!

☰ Recipe for Latkes

Makes approximately 12 palm-sized latkes

- 4 medium potatoes
- 1 medium onion
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup matzah meal (flour or bread crumbs can be substituted; mashed potato flakes for gluten-free)
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. each salt and black pepper (more or less to taste)
- vegetable oil



Shred the potatoes and onion into a large bowl. Press out all excess liquid. (if using a food processor, use the chopping blade for 2 or 3 seconds after pressing out liquid to avoid stringy fly-aways). Add eggs and mix well. Add matzah meal gradually while mixing until the batter is doughy, not too dry. (you may not need the whole amount, depending on how well you drained the veggies). Add the baking powder, salt and pepper and mix well. (don't taste the batter -- it's really gross!). Don't worry if the batter turns a little orange; that will go away when it fries. If you are using mashed potato flakes for gluten-free latkes, let the completed batter sit in the refrigerator for about 10 minutes before frying, to let it absorb some oil and firm up.

Heat about 1/2 inch of oil to medium-high heat. Form the batter into thin patties about the size of your palm. Fry batter in oil. Be patient: this takes time, and too much flipping will burn the outside without cooking the inside. Flip when the bottom is golden brown.

Place finished latkes on paper towels to drain. Eat hot with sour cream or applesauce. They reheat OK in a microwave, but not in an oven unless you cook them just right.

If you'd like to try something a little different, add some bell peppers, parsley, carrots, celery, or other vegetables to the batter to make veggie latkes! You may need to add a third egg and some more matzah meal for this. For a zesty twist, add some diced jalepeño peppers to the batter! This should definitely be served with sour cream!

I have put a [video on YouTube](#) that illustrates some hard-to-describe aspects of latke making: how deep to make the oil, how to tell when the oil is ready, how to tell when the latkes are ready to flip and so forth.

Time-saving substitutions:

Grocery stores now provide many time-saving options for cooking. The substitutions below will save you time in preparing the batter and cleaning up. Sorry, nothing I can do to speed the frying time. You can substitute any or all of these:

- Substitute 3 cups hash-brown style shredded potatoes for the potatoes (Simply Potatoes brand works well and is kosher-certified)
- Substitute 1 cup frozen chopped onions (thawed and drained) for the onion
- Substitute 1/2 cup egg whites from a carton for the eggs

≡ List of Dates

Chanukkah will occur on the following days of the secular calendar:

- Jewish Year 5784: sunset December 7, 2023 - nightfall December 15, 2023
(first candle: night of 12/7; last candle: night of 12/14)
- Jewish Year 5785: sunset December 25, 2024 - nightfall January 2, 2025
(first candle: night of 12/25; last candle: night of 1/1)
- Jewish Year 5786: sunset December 14, 2025 - nightfall December 22, 2025

(first candle: night of 12/14; last candle: night of 12/21)

- Jewish Year 5787: sunset December 4, 2026 - nightfall December 12, 2026

(first candle: night of 12/4; last candle: night of 12/11)

- Jewish Year 5788: sunset December 24, 2027 - nightfall January 1, 2028

(first candle: night of 12/24; last candle: night of 12/31)

For additional holiday dates, see [Links to Jewish Calendars](#).

Related Pages



Chanukah Candle Lighting Blessings

The procedure for lighting Chanukah candles, the prayers in Hebrew, English and transliterated Hebrew, and the traditional melody.



Virtual Dreidel Game

A little game of dreidel you can play that shows you the rules and how the game works.



Next Holiday: Tu B'Shevat

Learn about the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish Arbor Day, the New Year for Trees.



Last Holiday: Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Learn about the Jewish holidays at the conclusion of Sukkot: Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

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