

A Christian Celebration Of Hanukkah

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Basic Background: Sometime before the year 165 BC, the empire of Greece took over the land of Judah, in modern day Israel. King Antiochus and armies of Syria denied the Jewish believers the right to worship God, and took over the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was defiled and was used as a place of idol worship. The family of Judah Macabee began an uprising which eventually was victorious over the Greeks. The Children of Israel began to rededicate their temple, but they had only enough pure oil to keep the light burning for one day. Miraculously, the lamp burned for eight days giving them enough time to produce more oil.

This miracle is commemorated each year in a celebration called “The Festival Of Dedication” referring to the dedication of the temple after the Greek destruction. This festival is more commonly known as Hanukkah.

Celebration: This festival lasts for eight nights, and the centerpiece is a candle holder called a *menorah*. It has a place for nine candles, four on either side of a central candle which is elevated slightly. This center candle is called the *shamesh* or *helper* candle.



Each night the *shamesh* is lit first, then it is used to light the other candles. On the first night of Hanukkah the first candle is placed in the farthest right position. After the candle is lit and the blessings are said, place your menorah in a prominent window so that the light of God shines for your neighbors. Allow the candles to burn all the way out so that we do not extinguish this light.

The next night the second candle is placed next to the first, and the newest candle is lit first (using the *shamesh*) followed by the others so that you light the candles from left to right. Once again, the lights are allowed to burn until they are gone and the menorah is placed in a window. This can be repeated each night.

Food: Of course food is a very important part of any celebration and Hanukkah is no exception! Traditionally, food that is cooked in oil is served, and potato pancakes called “*latkes*” are a favorite along with jelly filled fried donuts.

Traditional Games: The most common game is played using a four sided top called a *dreidel*. On each of the four sides there is a letter of the Hebrew alphabet that represents an acronym for the phrase “A Great Miracle Happened There” meaning that a miracle happened in Jerusalem.



The game is played with candy or coins. Each player begins with the same number of items, and then everyone puts two of these in the center. Players take turns spinning the top. If it lands on “ש”, the player puts another piece in the middle. If it lands on “ה” the player takes half of what is in the center. If it lands on “ג” the player does nothing. If it lands on “ל” the player wins by taking all the pieces left in the center. After someone wins, the next game begins by everyone placing two pieces in the center.

An interesting side note is that a dreidel for a child in Jerusalem is different from those in other parts of the world. The phrase on those dreidels is “A Great Miracle Happened Here”

Other customs: Hanukkah can be a time of gift giving just as Christmas typically is. A gift can be presented on each night, but if only one gift is given it is likely reserved for the eighth night, which is the most lavishly celebrated.

Blessings:

Say this blessing over the candles before lighting them:

“Blessed are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has made us holy through God’s commandments, and commanded us to light the Hanukkah candles.”

Immediately say this blessing for the miracles:

“Blessed are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe who performed wonders for our ancestors in history at this very time of year.”

On the first night only, say this blessing immediately after:

“Blessed are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe who gave us life, sustains us, and enabled us to reach this season”

Enjoy celebrating this ancient festival with your family. Use it to engage your children in conversations about their faith and yours. Let this ritual become a way to communicate the importance of celebrating the roots of our faith and the strength that we have to continue to grow close to the God who loves us all.

Shalom to you all,
Teresa