

# Chanukah Lights Up Cold Winter Nights

## by Susan Cohen Reingold

The Jewish holiday of Chanukah, which begins this year on the evening of December 21st and is observed for eight days, is one of the most joyful on the Hebrew calendar.

Chanukah commemorates the success of the Maccabees, led by the heroic Judah, against the evil Antiochus, head of the mighty Syrian empire in 135 B.C.E.

While the small Jewish army overcoming the enemy to preserve the Jewish state is in itself a powerful occurrence, it is the moral victory that is the true wonder of the holiday.

This was a war not fought just for land or possessions, but for the freedom to worship God and to observe the Jewish faith. It is, in fact, the first time in recorded history that a successful battle was waged for religious freedom.

Upon the triumphant return of the Jews to Jerusalem, they found their holy temple desecrated and in shambles. The olive oil needed to light the holy candelabra had been tainted, and only a small flask with enough pure oil for one day was found. The oil miraculously burned for the eight days, and the temple was rededicated.

The customs associated with Chanukah, including weeklong candle lighting, gift-giving, the eating of special foods and playing "dreidel," make this holiday a particular favorite of children. It is the observing of these traditions that provokes youngsters to ask "why," and provides an opportunity to retell the dramatic story that has been an inspiration to Jews for thousands of years.

The Chanukah candles have provided a beacon of light during the darkest time of year. They have brought spiritual luminescence during times of suffering, and brought hope for better days - particularly during the years of the Holocaust. It is the indomitable Maccabean spirit that has kept the bright flame of hope burning for the Jewish people for so many years.

It is a time for family to be together, and the ritual lighting of the Menorah is observed all over the world. One candle is lit the first night, two the second, and so on. Special blessings are said and songs detailing the historic events are sung. Small gifts may be given nightly, and Chanukah "gelt" - money - is given to children and the poor.

One of the most popular rituals is the game of dreidel. A dreidel is a spinning top, and symbolically recalls the "turnover" of events that has become Chanukah. The Hebrew letters on the toy's four sides refer to the expression "nes godol haya shom" - "a great miracle happened there." The letters are a direction for a give-and-take game that has been played for generations.

Like on all other Jewish holidays, food is prominent in the celebration. Because oil played such a role in the miracle, it is traditional to prepare delicacies that are fried. Most

traditional is potato pancakes, or latkes, that are served with applesauce.

While the joyous holiday is commemorated all over the world, it is a national event in Israel. Chanukah provides an opportunity to acknowledge the heroic symbolism for all Jews, and the entire country is festooned with lights and decorations.

Pilgrimages are made to Modin, the birthplace of the Maccabean movement, and thousands of members of the Maccabi sports movement gather in a moving ceremony. Torches are lit, and there is a flame transported by relay to cities and settlements throughout the country. Among the stops is the Western Wall on the site of the Holy Temple, and Mount Zion, where lights are kindled in memory of those who were killed in the Holocaust.

Because it is a holiday week from school, school, youth, and sports groups enhance the festival greatly. Tournaments, music and dramatic programs are presented, along with great displays of charity and outreach to new immigrants.

Chanukah's significance is meaningful to all. While the triumph of a few over many is something all cultures can identify with, its true miracle is the triumph of the preservation of the freedom to practice one's religion.

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