

# Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that marks the victory of a Jewish group called the Maccabees over an invading Syrian army. Although it always falls between late November and early January, Hanukkah's exact dates on the Gregorian calendar vary each year. In 2021, Hanukkah will begin on the evening on November 28<sup>th</sup> and end on the evening of December 6<sup>th</sup>.

A note on pronunciation: Hanukkah starts with the Hebrew letter het, which is a guttural sound. It is sometimes written with a "ch" instead of an "h". In this fact sheet, we use an underlined h to signify the letter het when transliterating Hebrew words, including in the holiday greetings below.

## History of Hanukkah

According to the books Maccabees I and II, and in the volume *Shabbat* of the Talmud (the collection of discussions on Jewish law, customs, and biblical interpretation, circa 300-500 CE), a Syrian Greek army led by King Antiochus invaded Jerusalem in year 175 Before the Common Era (BCE). They attempted to force the Jewish people worship Greek gods and bow down to a statue of the king. The Ten Commandments forbids Jews from worshiping statues or idols, so they refused. A group of Jewish fighters called the Maccabees rebelled against the Syrian invasion. After a three-year war, the much smaller Jewish fighters recaptured Jerusalem. However, they found that the Temple had been almost completely destroyed.

The Jewish people then began to clean and rebuild the Temple. When they were done, they rededicated the Temple to God by lighting a lamp called a *menorah*. They only had enough oil to keep the lamp burning for one day, but the *menorah* stayed lit for eight days. Jewish texts regard this as a miracle symbolizing God's protection during a difficult time. Hanukkah literally means "rededication" and is also known as the Festival of Lights.

## Observance of Hanukkah

Many Jews celebrate Hanukkah by lighting candles on a candelabra called a hanukkiyah each night of Hanukkah. These candelabras are commonly referred to as menorahs. However, the Hebrew term "*menorah*" is technically only used to describe the original candelabra located in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Hanukkia'ot (plural of hanukkiyah) have nine branches rather than eight. The ninth branch, which is a different height from the other branches, is called the *shamash*, meaning servant. The candle from that branch is lit first and then used to light the other branches of the hanukkiyah.

On the first night of Hanukkah one candle of the hanukkiyah is lit; on the second night the first and second candles are lit; on the third night three candles are lit; and so on until all eight candles are lit on the eighth night. Two blessings are recited over the lighting of the candles. On the first night of Hanukkah a third blessing is recited as well. Often, hanukkia'ot are placed in a window or other place where they can be seen by the public, since publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah is a central part of the observance of Hanukkah.

Traditionally, Jews celebrate Hanukkah by eating fried food such as *latkes* (potato pancakes) and jelly donuts. The oil used in the fried foods is representative of the oil used to light the menorah in the Jewish temple. Other traditions include giving small amounts of money called *gelt* (children are often given chocolate coins instead) and playing *dreidel*, a game played with a spinning top. Usually, people play *dreidel* for small tokens such as pennies.

Gift-giving is not traditionally a key component of Hanukkah. However, because Hanukkah generally falls close to Christmas, many people now give gifts during Hanukkah.

## **Scheduling**

Hanukkah is generally not considered one of the most significant Jewish holidays (compared to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and others) and observances of Hanukkah occur during the evening. Though the holiday is typically celebrated outside of standard work hours, it is important to remember that employees may need scheduling accommodations during Hanukkah. Some employees may request days off to be with their families; others may ask for a modified schedule so that they can leave early during Hanukkah and get home in time to light the *hanukkah* candles and prepare for celebrations. Supervisors should work with employees to accommodate these requests.

## **Greetings for Hanukkah**

If you would like to recognize Hanukkah with your co-workers and friends, saying “Happy Hanukkah” would be appropriate. It is also appropriate to say *Hanukkah Sameah* (sah-MAY-ach), which means Happy Hanukkah in Hebrew, or *Hag Sameah*, which means “happy holiday” in Hebrew.

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