The Story of Hanukkah

The Festival of Lights

Hanukkah, also called the Festival of Lights, is an eight-night Jewish holiday. The Hebrew word **Hanukkah** means “dedication.”

More than 2,100 years ago, the land of Judea was ruled by the Seleucid Greek king **Antiochus IV**. He outlawed Jewish practice and desecrated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

A small band of Jewish fighters, led by **Judah Maccabee** and his brothers, rose up against him. After about three years they recaptured Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple, around 164 BCE.

Tradition tells that they found only one small jar of pure oil — enough to light the Temple menorah for a single day. Yet the oil burned for **eight days**.

Today, families light a menorah with nine branches: one for each night, plus the **shamash** or “helper” candle used to light the others. One more candle is added each night.

Hanukkah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of **Kislev**, which usually falls in late November or December. Foods fried in oil, such as **latkes** and **sufganiyot** (jelly doughnuts), recall the miracle of the oil, and families play **dreidel** and give **gelt**.

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