

History of Chanukah

Chanukah, the Hebrew word meaning dedication, beginning on 25 Kislev, commemorates the triumph of the Jews, under the Maccabees, over the Greek rulers (164 BCE) - both the physical victory of the small Jewish nation against mighty Greece and the spiritual victory of the Jewish faith against the Hellenism of the Greeks. One day Greek forces arrived at Modiin, the home of Mattityahu, an elder and religious leader of the prestigious Hasmonean family. There, the army established a Greek religious altar and ordered Mattityahu to offer a sacrifice to a pagan god. Mattityahu refused, but while he stood firm, another Jew offered to make the sacrifice. Enraged, Mattityahu killed him and attacked the Greek soldiers. His action sparked a Jewish rebellion, which he and his sons led. They became known as the Maccabees, which in Hebrew, means Men Who are as Strong as Hammers. Led by Judah Maccabee, the Maccabees, a force much smaller than the powerful Greek armies, finally triumphed in 165 B.C.E. On the 25th of Kislev, the Maccabees reclaimed the Jewish Temple, which was, at that point, almost unrecognisable as a place of Jewish worship

The story of Chanukah is documented in the Apocrypha which is not part of the biblical canon. These books are set aside from the bible as historical documents rather than divinely inspired texts

The ever changing meaning of Chanukah

The story of the miracle of Chanukah tells us how with the help of God the Jewish people were able to rededicate the temple to God. Maccabean Jews recaptured Jerusalem and the Temple. This war ended in the fall, around October. However, the victorious Maccabees waited until the Winter Solstice Festival, then called Nayrot (which means "lights"), to rededicate the Temple. **They changed the name of Nayrot to Chanukah, which means "dedication" and they hid the original meaning of the Nayrot festival.**

The story, written in the Talmud hundreds of years after the military victory, dismissed the political uprising and added the story of the **oil that miraculously lasted for eight days**. Oil was needed for the menorah (candelabrum) in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. According to the rabbis, 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. **The rabbis declared an eight-day festival to commemorate this miracle.** According to this explanation, the holiday commemorates the miracle of the oil, not the military victory. It shifts the emphasis from the military skill of the Maccabees, who are barely mentioned, to the supernatural intervention of God



One explanation as to why Chanukah really lasts for 8 days is because after the temple had been rededicated the Maccabees realised that they had not observed the festival of Succot while they had been fighting:

'They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing in the manner of the feast of tabernacles, mindful of how a little while before at the festivals of tabernacles they had been wandering about like wild beasts in the mountains and caves.

2 Maccabees 10.6 - 7

Another explanation for the real reason that we light candles on Chanukah is that after the Kingdom of Judah lost the legends began to grow about the Maccabean revolt and the miracle of oil. The more the idea of physical restoration of the temple became a physical impossibility the more the religious interpretation came to the foreground. The festival changed from being known as the Feast of Lights to the feast of rededication. Chanukah came to represent the survival of the Jewish culture and life



The modern Zionist movement took the story of Chanukah as a metaphor for the national revival of the Jewish people.

The 'Hovevi Zion' (Lovers of Zion) movement in Russia proposed that Chanukah should be the official holiday of the Zionist movement - it worked for both religious and secular Zionists. It became known as the festival of the 'Hasmoneans' rather than 'Chanukah' - rededication. They saw the Maccabee revolt as a secularist revolt to redeem the nation. A common song in Israel became **'no miracle of oil befell us, no cruse of oil did we find'**. **Weizmann** - the first president of Israel lit a Chanukiah with the candles stuck into Jaffa oranges, marking the festival as a truly Israeli holiday. In this way they managed to do what Herzl thought the Jewish people needed to do - turn the Chanukiah **'from its petrified menorah form, and to water its roots again as if it were really a tree'**.

How can the message and story of Chanukah have relevance to us?
Can we relate to the myth of the 'miracle of Chanukah'?

BA-ROOKH HA-OR BA-O-LAM
BA-ROOKH HA-OR BA-A-DAM
BA-ROOKH HA-OR BA-KHA-NOO-KAH

Blessed is the light in the world.
Blessed is the light of humanity.
Blessed is the light of Hanukkah.