

What Is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday that commemorates the victory of the Maccabees (leaders of Jewish rebels fighting religious persecution) over King Antiochus of Syria in 165 B.C.E. Following the victory, the Temple in Jerusalem was rededicated (Hanukkah is the Hebrew word for “dedication”). Also known as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah is a celebration of religious freedom, though it is not considered a major holiday.

When is it?

Hanukkah begins on the 25th day of Kislev, the ninth month of the Jewish calendar, which typically falls in November-December.

What do I need to Celebrate?

Menorah:

This nine-branched candelabrum, which is also known as a hanukkiah, is the most recognized symbol of Hanukkah. One candle is the shamash, or helper candle, that is used to light the others after the blessings are recited, one for each night of the holiday. The proper way to light the menorah is to add one candle each night in the following order: On the first night, place one candle in the far right holder and light it, using the helper candle. On the second night, add another candle to the immediate left of the first candle and light that first, followed by the original candle. Follow that pattern of adding from right to left, but lighting from left to right, until all eight candles are burning on the final night.



Fried Foods:

It's customary to eat fried foods, such as potato pancakes (latkes) or doughnuts (sufganiyot), to commemorate the miracle of the oil found in the Temple.

According to legend, when the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple, they found a single jar of oil to light the ner tamid (eternal light), only enough to keep it lit for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days (hence, the eight candles plus the helper candle).

Dreidel :

Playing a game with this four-sided spinning toy is a family custom at Hanukkah. On each side are Hebrew letters that together form the acronym **ש ה ג ה** that stands for the Hebrew words **נִסְגָּדוֹל הָיָה שָׁם** translated as **A Great Miracle Happened There (in Jerusalem)**, a reference to the miracle of the oil in the Temple. To play the game, each player needs the same number of coins or candy, and play begins with every player putting two pieces in the center. Players take turns spinning the dreidel. If it lands on **ש**, the player puts in another piece. If it lands on **ה**, , the player takes half the pieces from the center. If it lands on **ג**, the player does nothing. If it lands on **ל**, the player wins by taking all the pieces from the center. After a win, play continues with everyone placing two more pieces in the center.

Presents:

Although it's not traditional or required, American Jews often give presents to their children during Hanukkah, following the practice of Christians giving gifts during the holidays. Some people also give to charities or perform charitable acts during the holidays.



Hanukkah Blessings

Blessing over the candles

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו,
וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנוּכָּה.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.

Blessed are You Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has made us holy through God's commandments, and commands us to light the Hanukkah candles.

Blessing for miracles

Recite Immediately Following the First Blessing, Prior to Lighting!

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam, She'ahsa neesim la'avotaynu bayamim haheim baz'man hazeh.

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

Blessing for special occasions

Recite Following the Blessing for Miracles Only on the First Night of Hanukkah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

BBarukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam, shehekheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.

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



How Can I Keep the Party Going?

Many families look for alternative ways to celebrate, other than giving gifts for all eight nights, in order to focus on the joy of the holiday. Here are some suggestions:

First Night: Gift Night– Celebrate by giving small gifts. Additionally, have every family member choose another family member's name out of a hat. Family members can then make (rather than purchase) a gift for the selected relative to be given later during the holiday.

Second Night: Craft Night– Make Hanukkah-related crafts or decorations to display in your home. These can be Happy Hanukkah signs, color pictures of dreidels, a creative menorah and anything else that comes to mind.

Third Night: Family Game Night– Every family member chooses a game for the family to play.

Fourth Night: Book Night– Give books as gifts or borrow Hanukkah-themed books from the library and read them together.

Fifth Night: Dessert Night– Celebrate with food! Make or buy jelly doughnuts, cookies shaped like menorahs or dreidels, or whatever your family enjoys.

Sixth Night: Family Outing– Choose something fun to do as a family, such as going to the movies or a favorite restaurant.

Seventh Night: Give a Gift– Present the gifts you made from the first night.

Eighth Night: Tzedakah Night– Tzedakah is Hebrew for “justice,” so this is a night to do something to make the world a better place by helping those in need. This can take many forms, including charitable donations, working on behalf of social causes etc.

Still have questions?

For more information about Hanukkah, interfaith events and programs around Atlanta, and the JFGA's Interfaith Connector, contact Doug Konkel at dkonkel@jewishatlanta.org