



Hanukkah 101



What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday that celebrates freedom and the rededication of the Jewish temple after it was taken back from the Greeks in the 2nd century BCE.

The story of Hanukkah:

Way back in the second century BCE, after years of oppression and forced restrictions of Jewish religious and cultural practices, a small army of Jews called the Maccabees fought back and triumphed over the far larger Syrian-Greek military. When they eventually reclaimed the Holy Temple of Jerusalem, there was only enough oil to keep the menorah lit for one day. Miraculously, that small bit of oil burned for eight whole days — long enough to procure more oil.

What are some Hanukkah traditions?

The major tradition of Hanukkah is lighting candles on a special menorah or *hanukkiyah*. Lighting a Hanukkah menorah (*hanukkiyah* in Hebrew) is the most central part of the holiday, which is why Hanukkah is known as the Festival of Lights. The original menorah in the Hanukkah story had seven branches, but the menorah we light on Hanukkah has nine branches — one for each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, and an additional one for the *shamash*, the helper candle used to light all of the other candles.

Other Hanukkah activities recall the story and celebrate the freedom that the Jews experienced upon the Maccabees' victory. Those activities include the spinning of the *dreidel* (spinning top) that has the Hebrew letters Nun, Gimmel, Hay, and Shin, on each side standing for *Nes Gadol Haya Sham* (Hebrew for "a great miracle happened there"); and foods fried in oil, like latkes and jelly donuts, remind us of, well, oil!

Where to learn more: pjlibrary.org/hanukkah

My favorite Hanukkah books are:
