

חַנּוּכָּה

Hanukkah - The Celebration

Hanukkah, or the Feast of Dedication, celebrates the miracles which HaShem did for our fathers in the times of the Maccabees. It is also called the “Festival of Lights” because it has become our tradition to light a special menorah, called a “hanukiah,” as we celebrate the festival. The hanukiah is different from the traditional menorah because it has a total of nine lights or candles. One candle, the one which is tallest, is the “shammash” candle or “helper candle” and is used to light all of the rest. This reminds us of the one cruse of undefiled oil which remained lit the entire eight days of dedication and purification of the Temple. From this one cruse of oil, each day received its light. So, on the first evening of hanukkah we light the shammash candle, and then use it to light the far left candle. We let the candles burn all the way, using new candles or lights for each night. The next night we light the shammash and two candles (beginning with the far left and working to the right) and continue until on the eighth night we have all the candles lit. The candles are to remind us of G-d’s miracles on our behalf at a time when our enemies tried to take away our heritage and our worship of HaShem. When we were only few, and the enemy was very great, HaShem did a great miracle by giving us victory, and then also provided us with the miracle of the menorah light so that we would not forget the greater miracle He had done for us on the battle field. In all times our existence and freedom to worship HaShem as He has prescribed is proof that He is preserving us so that we might sanctify His name upon the earth!



We have many other wonderful traditions that surround the festival of Hanukkah. One is the game we play with a dreidle. This four-sided top was used during times when the foreign governments under which we lived prohibited us from studying Torah. We would gather around each other and study together, always having a dreidle handy. When the officials would separate our little groups, they would find two men playing dreidle in the middle of the circle, and leave us alone! On the dreidle are four letters, ש, ה, ג, נ, which are the first letters of נֶסְ גְדוֹל הָיָה שָׁמַיִם, “a great miracle happened there.” Those who dwell in the Land must have the phrase “a great miracle happened here” (נֶסְ גְדוֹל הָיָה פֶּה) and thus have the letters נ, ג, ה, פ on their dreidles.

It is also traditional to make special foods at Hanukkah. For instance, since the miracle of the oil happened at Hanukkah, it has become traditional to make potatoe pancakes called “latkes” which are fried or baked in oil. We also make “suf ganiot” or little donuts which provide a sweet treat for the holiday.

We should never forget that HaShem wants us to celebrate His victories. Yeshua Himself celebrated Hanukkah (John 10:22), going to the Temple during the Feast of Dedication, and joining those who recognized the importance of the Temple, and the miracle that HaShem did in restoring it to our people. We all await the time when Yeshua will return and, once again, restore the Temple to us, and bring us to fully understand the worship of HaShem.