

A HOME GUIDE FOR CHANUKAH

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THE STORY OF CHANUKAH

In the year 168 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), the Greco-Syrians, under the leadership of King Antiochus IV, ordered the end of all Jewish ritual as it had been practiced for generations. The Jews were shocked and distressed to think that their Temple worship, so much a part of their lives, would come to an end. They did not want to worship pagan gods, nor bow down to idols; neither did they want their Holy Temple profaned.

In Modin, a small country village, there lived a man by the name of Mattathias. He was a devoted Jew, and he taught his five sons the importance of living according to the tenets of Judaism. They could not stand by idly as their Temple was being destroyed, nor could they allow the end of the Jewish people. Judah, one of the five sons, was a brilliant strategist. Joining with his equally devoted brothers, and a small army, he was able to wage a three-year battle, overcoming the much better equipped Greco-Syrian army.

At last, on the 25th day of Kislev, in the year 165 B.C.E., they were successful in pushing out the Greco-Syrian army, and they immediately reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, it had been terribly overrun - defiled and defamed. They quickly cleaned the Temple, restoring it to its original beauty.

In ancient times, Jews would come from all over Israel to worship on various holidays. Sukkot, which is an eight-day holiday that falls in October, had not yet been celebrated that year because of the Greco-Syrians' control of the Temple. After the Temple was cleansed that December (the 25th of Kislev), the people celebrated Sukkot (an October holiday) in December. The following year the Sukkot holiday was celebrated back at its original time in October. But now in December there was a new eight-day holiday. For eight days the Jews everywhere would celebrate *Chanukah*, to remember the miracle of a small group of ill-equipped Jews who were able to overcome a greater and stronger army.

The Legend of the Oil

There is also a legend which tells of an incident that happened when the Jews finally reached the Holy Temple. Their task was to light the *Ner Tamid* (the eternal light which still hangs over the Ark in every synagogue) that had been allowed to burn out during the Greco-Syrian occupation. They were only able to find enough special oil to last one day, even though it would take eight days to get more of the special oil needed for the lamp. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, giving them enough time to get more oil!

KINDLING THE CHANUKAH LIGHTS

The *menorah* or *chanukiah* symbolizes the religious freedom for which our people have always fought. The flickering lights remind us of the constant struggle, not only for our own religious liberty, but for all people's struggle for freedom.

Each night at sunset, the candles on the *chanukiah* are lit. The candles are added one each night, from the right to the left. They are lit (using the *shamash*) from left to right. It is a custom to put the *chanukiah* in the window, so that all will be reminded of the great miracle of Chanukah. On Shabbat during Chanukah, the *chanukiah* is lit first, followed by the Sabbath candles.

It is a custom to gather the family together around the menorah (*chanukiah*). The *mitzvah* of lighting the candles should be rotated among the members of the family so that each member has an opportunity to light the *chanukiah* on at least one of the eight nights.

On the first night, the *sh'heh'chee'yanu* prayer is said. It is also a tradition to sing "Maoz Tzur" ("Rock of Ages") following the lighting of the candles on each of the eight nights.

THE BLESSINGS

(The candles are placed in the Menorah from right to left, and lit from left to right.)

Baruch atah adonai, elohainu melech ha'o'lam, asher keedshanu beh'meetz'votav vih'tzee'vahnu l'hadleek ner shel Chanukah.

Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who hallows us with his mitzvot, and commands us to kindle the Chanukah lights.

Baruch atah adonai, elohainu melech ha'olam, she'asah nee-seem la'avotainu bayameem ha'h'em, bazman hazeh.

Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who performed wondrous deeds for our ancestors in days of old, at this season. (This blessing is said on the first night only.)

Baruch atah adonai, elohainu melech ha'o'lam, sh'heh'cheh'yanu, ve'kee'ye'manu, ve'hee'gee'yanu laz'man ha'zeh.

Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

(all sing)

MAOZ TZUR

Ma-oz tzur yeh-shu-ah-ti
L'-chah na-eh leh-sha-bay-ach
Ti-kon bayt teh-fi-lah-ti
V'-sham toh-dah neh-za bay-ach
L'-ate ta-chin mat-bay-ach
Mi-Tsar ham-na-bay-ach
Az eg-mor, b'-shir miz-mor
Cha-nu-kat ha-miz-bay-ach

Rock of Ages

Rock of ages, let our song
Praise Thy saving power.
Thou amidst the raging foes,
Was our sheltering tower.
Furious they assailed us,
But Thine arm availed us,
And They word, broke their sword,
when our own strength failed us.

THE DREIDEL

The most popular of all chanukah games is dreidel. The word comes from the German "dreihen" or to spin, which refers to the "turnover" of events when Judah the Maccabee was able to overcome the unlikely odds, and retake the Holy Temple. There is a tradition that during the time the Jews were forbidden from studying Jewish texts, they played "dreidel" while orally discussing the Talmud. If they were discovered, the dreidel game was a great cover!

The letters on the top (nun, gimmel, hey, shin) refer to the statement, *Nes gadol hayah sham*, "a great miracle happened there." The dreidel is spun by the players, and according to what letter comes out on top, the participants either take out or put in Chanukah gelt (coins).

(nun) take nothing
(gimmel) take all

(hey) take half
(shin) put money in

DECEMBER DILEMMAS

Raising children is not always an easy task, and for parents who are attempting to raise responsible Jewish children in a predominantly non-Jewish environment, December can be quite a challenge! Over the years I have tried to develop an approach to the dilemmas faced by parents at Christmas time. My approach is by no means definitive, but it does provide a framework upon which decisions can be made.

I believe that everyone needs a religion. A system of moral and ethical guidelines is necessary for every human being, as are various customs and rituals to mark the passage of time. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus as Messiah, an extremely important concept for Christians, but one that is inconsistent with Jewish beliefs. While Christmas is certainly a beautiful holiday, it is not a secular holiday. Since I am a Jew, both by birth and by choice, it would be terribly inappropriate for me to observe rituals that belong to a system to which I do not adhere.

At the same time, I recognize the fact that most Americans observe Christmas. One cannot escape the constant barrage of Christmas advertisements, guaranteeing us a "Merry Christmas" if we buy this or that product. Even in our public school, while it may be inappropriate, classes plan a wide array of Christmas pageants and other observances of the holiday. It is not easy for parents to deny their children what everyone else seems to imply is every child's "natural right."

I believe that children should be taught that there can be "wishes" and "needs." A Jewish child may "wish" s/he could share more directly in Christmas. This in itself is not bad. But, for parents to provide a Christmas tree for their children because they feel a child "needs" one is, in my opinion, wrong. A child does not "need" to celebrate Christmas, though s/he may wish to.

It is important for children to respect their Christian friends' holiday, and to understand the Christmas celebrations of members of their own families who may not be Jewish. But to bring elements of a religious holiday that is not ours into our lives compromises our integrity as Jews. And to justify our involvement with the argument that Christmas is nothing more than a secular celebration unfairly diminishes the significance of Christmas for Christians.

While we certainly cannot ignore a holiday that is so universally celebrated, we first and foremost owe our children a certain fidelity to our Jewish traditions. If we are tentative about what is Jewish, what is Christian, and what is secular, then we deny our children a deep appreciation for our own Jewish tradition.

Obviously, each family must make decisions for themselves, but we must always remember that we are transmitting messages to our children by the kinds of choices we make for them and for ourselves.

There is a story told about Benjamin Disraeli, Prime Minister of England, who, although born a Jew, was baptized by his father while still a child. Queen Victoria happened to observe Disraeli at a prayer service, leafing through pages. "Mr. Disraeli," said the Queen, "I have been watching you. Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

"Your Majesty," answered the Prime Minister, "You know that in the Bible, between the Old and the New Testament, there is an empty page; I am that empty page."

I believe that we sometimes confuse our children's wishes with their needs, which results in our inadvertently giving them *nothing* when we try to give them *everything*. Indeed, Jewish children must be taught to respect the traditions of their Christian friends and relatives; but they must also be firmly taught about what is and what is not Jewish.

I do not suggest that this is an easy time of the year for parents, but I believe we have a serious obligation to our children -- to think through the choices we make. Our decisions are not merely about Christmas trees and Santa Claus; rather, our choices go right to the core of our identity as Jews.