

Chanukkah, the Jewish festival of rededication, also known as the festival of lights, is an eight day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev.

The Story

The story of Chanukkah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but allowed the lands under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this relatively benevolent rule, many Jews assimilated much of Hellenistic culture, adopting the language, the customs and the dress of the Greeks, in much the same way that Jews in America today blend into the secular American society.

More than a century later, a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV was in control of the region. He began to oppress the Jews severely, placing a Hellenistic priest in the Temple, massacring Jews, prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion, and desecrating the Temple by requiring the sacrifice of pigs (a non-kosher animal) on the altar. Two groups opposed Antiochus: a basically nationalistic group led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and his son Judah Maccabee, and a religious traditionalist group known as the Chasidim, the forerunners of the Pharisees. They joined forces in a revolt against both the assimilation of the Hellenistic Jews and oppression by the Seleucid Greek government. The revolution succeeded and the Temple was rededicated.

According to tradition, at the time of the rededication, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the menorah (candelabrum) in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. 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. An eight day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle. Note that the holiday commemorates the miracle of the oil, not the military victory: Jews do not glorify war.

Gift-giving is not a traditional part of the holiday, but has been added in places where Jews have a lot of contact with Christians, as a way of dealing with our children's jealousy of their Christian friends. It is extremely unusual for Jews to give Chanukkah gifts to anyone other than their own young children. The only traditional gift of the holiday is "gelt," small amounts of money.

Chanukkah is not a very important religious holiday. Chanukkah is not mentioned in Jewish scripture; the story is related in the book of Maccabees, which Jews do not accept as scripture.

German Maoz Tzur

"Maoz Tzur" is without any doubt the most popular Chanukah [Hanukkah] song. The Maoz Tzur tune that is by now considered to be "traditional" in most parts of the Jewish world, is an adaptation of a German folk song

מַעֲזַז צוּר יְשׁוּעָתִי לְךָ נִאֶה לְשַׁבַּח.
תְּכוֹן בַּיִת תְּפִלָּתִי וְשָׁם הוֹדָה נִזְבַּח.
לַעֲת תִּכְיֶן מַטְבַּח מִצָּר הַמְּנַפֵּחַ.
אֶז אֶגְמֹר בְּשִׁיר מִזְמוֹר חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

Transliteration:

Ma-oz Tzur Y'shu-a-ti Lee-cha Na-eh L'sha-bei-ach
Ti-kon Beit T'fi-la-ti V'sham To-da N'za-bei ach
L'eit Ta-chin Mat bei ach Mi-tzar Ha-mi-na-bei-ach
Az Eg-mor B'shir Miz-mor Cha-nu-kat Ha-miz-bei-ach

Translation:

O mighty stronghold of my salvation,
to praise You is a delight.
Restore my House of Prayer
and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.
When You will have prepared the slaughter
for the blaspheming foe,
Then I shall complete with a song of hymn
The dedication of the Altar.