

HANUKKAH
November '11 OOM
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From the time my children were in day care and pre-school, I taught about *Hanukkah* (aka *Chanukah*, *Hannuka*, etc) to the children, to teachers, to families. So, I thought I'd share with you what I taught others of all ages.

The very first thing to know is that *Hanukkah* is NOT the Jewish Christmas. It celebrates an event in Jewish history that happened about 200 years before Christ was born. It commemorates the historic victory of the Maccabees following a three-year long uprising against the ruling Assyrian-Greek regime and their Jewish Hellenist supporters who conspired to impose restrictions against Jewish religious practices and values. The struggle culminated with the recapture of the Temple of Jerusalem and the restoration of its traditional Jewish service. Hanukkah means "dedication" and refers to the rededication of the Temple after it had been defiled. The miracle of the oil during those days of cleaning up the Temple is also celebrated: though there was only enough oil to burn for one day, it burned for eight days - and that is why we celebrate this holiday by lighting candles for eight nights.

The second important thing to know is that *Hanukkah* is **not** a major Jewish holiday; it has gained more widespread knowledge and practice because it is so proximal to Christmas. It is widely celebrated, but is actually a minor holiday. The major holidays include *Rosh Hoshanah* (New Year), *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), *Shabbat* (Sabbath), *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Giving of the Ten Commandments).

It is no coincidence that *Hanukkah* and Christmas - as well as the winter holidays of other religions - involve lights: the long and often cold winter nights were livened, lightened, and heated through these burning lights.

Because the Jewish calendar is a lunar one, the date of *Hanukkah* (and all other Jewish holidays) is different from year to year. There is a joke that says that Jews don't know when *Hanukkah* is until a Christian friend asks and they have to look it up! (Okay, I only shared that with adults). Though the date varies, it will always be in December with rare exception. This year the holiday starts the evening of December 20; next year December 8.

The holiday is celebrated for eight nights: on each night, blessings are sung, candles lit, and songs, food, gifts, dreidle games ensue.

The *Hanukkah* menorah - aka *hannukiah* - has places for nine candles: one for each night of the holiday, and the ninth spot is for the "worker candle" or "shamash candle," which is lit to light all the other candles. In other words, the nightly candles are not lit directly with the match, but with the shamash candle.

Before I go any further about the lighting of the candles - there is a set way to do it - let's talk about what a *hannukiah* has to look like: it has to have places for nine candles, and that's it. The ninth is elevated above the other eight. Otherwise, it doesn't have to look

a certain way, be made of specific materials, or even look religious! It just has to be safe for burning candles. In fact, the candles are pretty standard, but even they may vary a lot, including in different sizes to match the menorah.

Many years ago, I set about collecting *hannukiot* (plural for *hannukiah*), but soon found out they were taking up too much space! Here is a part of my collection:



From my childhood



Glass Menorah



Made in Kenya



Whimsical Wood Menorah



So small it uses birthday cake candles

At least one year in each child's Sunday school history, a very functional and cherished *hannukiah* is made out of 2x4's or wooden paint stirrer, nuts and bolts, glitter and paint! (Sorry, no pictures)

And here is part of the MIA's collection:



2003.228.40a,b 1880 Germany



98.136.13a,b 19th C. Italy

A *hanukkiyah* might not even take candles: it can use oil and a wick like in ancient times, or even be electric!

Now for how the candles are lit:

At sundown on the first night, the *shamash* is lit which in turn lights one candle while three blessings are sung. The first two blessings are about the lights of the holiday, the third is only said the first night, and celebrates that we are all together (it is used at many other occasions throughout the year). Then both candles are allowed to burn completely (sometimes there are lighthearted bets as to which candle will last the longest).

Second night, a new *shamash* is lit which in turn lights two candles while the first two blessings from the first night are said. Then they burn completely.

Third night: new *shamash*, three new candles, same two blessings.

And so on and so on.

There is an order to placing the candles and lighting them: facing the menorah, the first candle is placed on the far right; additional nights, candles are added to the left, but the lighting of them each night starts at the furthest left (newest candle) and are lit from left to right.

The other ritual object of *Hanukkah* is the *dreidl* (aka *dreidle*, *dreidel*): the spinning top. It has four Hebrew letters on it making the acronym: A Great Miracle Happened There (in Israel). Games are played utilizing these four Hebrew letters.

The *dreidl* hasn't always been about *Hanukkah* games: throughout Jewish history, religious study has at times been forbidden; Jews would still study their ancient texts, but when the enemy soldiers approached, the books would quickly be hidden and the *dreidls* pulled out, so it would look like the Jews were merely gathered for play!

As with the *Hanukkah* menorah, a *dreidl* can look like anything, be made of anything, and doesn't even have to spin but be solely decorative.

Here is part of my collection (moving on to something smaller than menorahs to collect):



The four-colored square dreidl becomes a menorah!

And, part of the MIA's collection:



98.136.1 1900 Europe

THE food of Hanukkah is the latke - potato pancake fried in oil (linking the food to the miraculous oil). There are other foods, like a certain kind of deep-fried jelly-filled donut, but the main player is the latke.

There is no shortage of fun and/or informative children's books for this holiday. Eric A. Kimmel's Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins is an award-winner and wildly popular.

My personal favorites include Kimmel's The Chanukah Guest, which is not only a delightful story about a bear showing up for Chanukah, but also goes through a typical

Chanukah celebration; and Harriett K. Feder's Judah Who Always Said, "No!" which gives the story of the Maccabees while showing conviction for what you believe in in a fun and child-understandable way.

This has been a bit longer than I intended, but know you will find it useful next month.

Resources:

Me, myself, and I - and lots of self-learning whilst raising my young (who each have their own Hanukkah).

Tours (aside from the obvious Winterlights):

Religious customs, practices.

Commemoration of War

Conflict Resolution