

Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights

In 198 BC, the powerful Syrian King Antiochus III (the Great), took control of Jerusalem. Initially, the Jews welcomed him because he gave treasures to the Temple.

In 169-168 BC, the son of Antiochus III, Antiochus IV, who was also known as Epiphanes, ruled Jerusalem in a cruel manner. He desecrated the Temple openly and in mockery of the Jews and God by sacrificing a pig on the altar in honor of the false god, Baal Shamen, proclaiming himself to be a god. Baal Shamen was also known throughout the Greek world as Zeus.

Additionally, he prohibited the Jewish sacrifices and ceremonies, forbidding such practices as circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath. He did not stop there, though, and he went so far as to order the killing of any Jew possessing a copy of the Holy Scriptures. These outrages brought an internal struggle that had been brewing underneath the surface within Judaism out in the open. On the one hand there were the observant Jews who wanted to keep the Torah, and on the other hand were the Hellenized Jews who wanted to assimilate into the Greek culture around them and become "born again" Greeks! War erupted between the Syrians and the Jews in which the brilliant Jewish military strategist, Judas Maccabees, repeatedly defeated the Syrian armies. Under his leadership, Jerusalem was delivered from this cruel king in the month of Chislev, which often coincides with our month of December. This transpired in the year 165 BC. The Jews have celebrated this time of deliverance from the Syrians since as Hanukkah, or the Feast of Lights.

During the time of struggle, Antiochus sent troops from village to village with a statue of himself ordering people to bow down to it. One day they arrived in the village of Modi'im. An elderly man stepped forward to comply with the order, but an observant priest, Mattathias of the Hasmonean family, thrust him through with a spear and also killed one of the Seleucid soldiers. Thus began the Maccabean revolt. Mattathias, his five sons and others fled into the Gophna Hills and conducted a guerrilla war against the Seleucids for three years. Finally, Jerusalem was liberated yet the Temple was defiled. The Rabbis recount the miracle of Hanukkah in these terms: "On Kislev 25 begin the Hanukkah days, eight of them.... When the Greeks entered the Temple Sanctuary, they contaminated all the oil. When the Hasmoneans defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil bearing the High Priest's seal. This cruse had enough oil of only one day's burning, but a miracle came to pass and it lasted eight days. The following year, these days were declared a holiday to be celebrated with the saying of Hallel and thanksgiving prayers." (*Megillat Taanit*) This is the reason the Jews light one additional candle each night on their candelabrum during this season.

Lighting the Candles

Right after nightfall, once it's dark outside (aside for Friday afternoon, when the candles are lit shortly before sunset).

All 8 Chanukah lights need to be lined up on the same level, but the Shamesh candle must be separate!

Some people put their Menorah in the doorway opposite the Mezuzah, while others place it near the window. We do this to spread the Chanukah light! In these places, people are sure to see your Menorah, and remember the great miracles that G-d performed

We place candles in the Menorah from right to left, but we light the candles from left to right.

On the first night we light one candle on the right side. On the second night we light the new, candle first, starting from the left and moving to the right. We continue this way every night of Chanukah, adding a candle each night

The Chanukah candles cannot be used to light each other, which is why we use the Shamesh Candle to light the Menorah. It's not one of the 8 Chanukah candles, so we set it in a place above the rest. The lights of the Chanukah candles are special - only for looking at, not for using. Let your candles burn all the way through. It is good for the eyes - and the soul!

Messiah is the servant candle that lights the rest of the candles, so you light the servant candle first. Then use it to light one candle on the far right. Every night you will light a new servant candle and add one more candle to the bottom row going from right to left (like the Hebrew language). Candles are lit from left to right.

While holding the shammus candle, recite the following blessings.

Blessing over Candles

Barukh atah Adonai, Elohaynu, melekh ha-olam
(Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe)

asher keed'shanu b'meetzvotav v'tzeevanu
(who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded* us)

[*Note: At El Shaddai we realize that there is no commandment to light the candles and encourage you to use the word "inspired"]

l'had'lik neir shel Chanukah (Amein)
(to light the candles of Chanukah. Amen)

Blessing for Hanukkah

Barukh atah Adonai, Elohaynu, melekh ha-olam
(Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe)

she-asah neeseem la-avotaynu ba-yameem ha-heim ba-z'man ha-zeh (Amein)
(who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time. Amen)

Shehecheyanu (first night only)

Barukh atah Adonai, Elohaynu, melekh ha-olam
(Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe)

she-hecheeyanu v'keey'manu v'heegeeyanu la-z'man ha-zeh (Amein)
(who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Amen)