

Hanukkah Traditions

Hanukkah, meaning “dedication” in Hebrew, refers to the joyous eight-day celebration during which Jews commemorate the victory of the Macabees over the armies of Syria in 165 B.C.E. and the subsequent liberation and “rededication” of the Temple in Jerusalem. The modern home celebration of Hanukkah centers around the lighting of the chanukiyah, a special menorah for Hanukkah; unique foods, latkes and jelly doughnuts; and special songs and games.

Lighting the Chanukiah

We begin with one candle on the first night, and add one candle each night for eight nights. In addition, we light the shamash each night which we use to light the other candles. The candles should be added to the menorah from the right to the left, but they are lit from left to right. The blessings are recited each night with the lit shamash in hand, after which the candles are lit immediately. The first two blessings are sung every night, the third only on the first night.

Playing Dreidel

The Hebrew word for dreidel is sevivon, which, as in Yiddish, means to turn around. Dreidels have four [Hebrew] letters on them, and they stand for the saying, “Nes Gadol Haya Sham,” meaning “a great miracle occurred there.” In Israel, instead of the fourth letter “shin,” there is a “peh,” which means the saying is “Nes Gadol Haya Po” – “a great miracle occurred here.”

- All players get an equal amount of pennies, chocolate coins (gelt), candies, raisins, or tokens.
- All players put one token in the pot in the center.
- The dreidel is a four-sided spinning top with a different Hebrew letter on each side. Players take turns spinning the dreidel.
- The player acts according to the letter which is facing up when the dreidel stops spinning.
- Nun means the player does nothing.
- Gimel means the player takes all the tokens from the pot.
- Hay means the player takes half of the tokens from the pot.
- Shin (or peh in Israel) means the player puts one token into the pot.
- The winner is the one with the most tokens.

