

THE STORY OF HANUKKAH

Eight Nights of Readings

Lighting the First Candle

In 333 BCE, Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great conquered Syria, Persia, Egypt and Judea, introducing Greek culture into the Ancient Near East. Both Alexander and his successor, the Syrian king Antiochus III,¹ allowed the Israelites to continue practicing Judaism even while some embraced the ways of Greece. The land to which Abraham and Sarah had first journeyed, to which Moses, Aaron and Miriam had led the former slaves, and whose tribes had been united in 1000 BCE by King David, still belonged to the people of Israel. But dark clouds were approaching.

Tomorrow evening, we'll begin inserting our candles from right to left, then lighting them from left to right. But tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's first light, we recall our people's earliest stories and give thanks for those who first brought the nation of Israel into the family of humankind.

Lighting the Second Candle

Israel's neighbors, the Syrians, had become Hellenists, adopting Greek culture and practices as their own. In 175 BCE, their king, Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes, decided he would Hellenize all of the Israelites. He began to rule with unprecedented harshness and cruelty, outlawing Shabbat, b'rit milah,² and Torah study. Imprisonment or execution was the price for anyone who was caught practicing these forbidden ways. The Jerusalem Temple became a place for worshipping the gods of Greece.

Tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's two lights, we recall the many times in our and other people's histories when one has blocked the path of another, and we give thanks for those moments when people have embraced and have known peace.

Lighting the Third Candle

A Jewish resistance movement began to grow in Israel. Led by a priestly family known as the Hashmonayim, its leader, Matityahu, had five sons: Yehudah, Yonatan, Elazer, Yokhanan and Shimon. When the Syrian king's officer came to the city of Modi'in, he said to Matityahu, who lived there, "You are a great man and well known in this city. Come and fulfill the king's orders." But Matityahu turned to the officer and answered in a loud voice, "Neither I nor my children nor any faithful Israelite will ever worship an idol."

Tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's three lights, we recall how often, in the darkest of times, courage has still managed to rule the day, and we give thanks for those who nurtured the struggles to preserve justice and mercy.

¹ 198 BCE

² Circumcision

Lighting the Fourth Candle

After Matityahu refused to participate in Greek worship, the Syrian officer who had been sent to Modi'in to supervise its Hellenization called for another volunteer. As one of the Israelites stepped forward to offer sacrifice before a pagan idol, Matityahu's anger exploded and he struck down the Israelite. Leaping to the top of an altar, he shouted, "All who are faithful to God, follow me!" The rebelling Israelites fled Modi'in and hid out in the hills above Judea.

Tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's four lights, we recall the challenges in a world where the zealous pursuit of wealth and power have blinded so many to the universal need for fairness, and we give thanks for those in every age have stood tall and dared to speak truth to power.

Lighting the Fifth Candle

Matityahu's son, Judah, known as "The Maccabee, the Hammer" became commander-in-chief of Israel's guerilla army. Bravely, and against unfair odds, Judah led his people in battle against the Syrians, facing down well-disciplined legions that were much larger and far mightier.

Unscrupulously, the Syrians attacked an Israelite stronghold on Shabbat, knowing the Jews would not take up arms on their day of rest. When word of the massacre came to the Maccabees, Matityahu and his sons swore to fight on, even during Shabbat, in order to defend their people and their faith.

Tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's five lights, we recall the hateful demands that oppression and persecution unreasonably place on the shoulders those who are forced to withstand epidemics of intolerance, and we give thanks for those of unfailing courage who take up the banner of justice and selflessly pursue its preservation.

Lighting the Sixth Candle

For three long years, the fighting wore on. In each battle, the Syrians greatly outnumbered the Israelites. But Judah would tell his soldiers,³ "To God, there is no difference between the many and the few. Strength comes from Heaven, and those who lawlessly seek to destroy us and our families, while we fight for our lives and our way of life, will succumb to a might far greater than their own." And thus, the real miracle of Hanukkah occurred: the Israelites prevailed. In 164 BCE, Judah, his family, and all of Judea, returned to Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple. This was the very first Hanukkah, whose Hebrew name means "rededication."

Tonight, as we kindle Hanukkah's six lights, we recall the stories of those in so many times and places who have refused to back down from a greater but corrupted power, and we give thanks for the courage and strength that come to those who are willing to struggle against a mighty enemy for the cause of goodness and peace.

³ I Maccabees 3:18ff

Lighting the Seventh Candle

In 63 BCE, after a century of Hashmonayim rule, Israel was conquered by the Roman general Pompey. Over time, the Israelites saw their political and religious freedoms diminish once again and the rabbis faced a dilemma. The celebration of Hanukkah was growing in popularity under Rome's oppressive rule, and the rabbis feared reprisals if Hanukkah were seen by Rome as a celebration of military revolt. So a rabbinic legend was fabricated to placate the Romans.⁴ A tale was spun of the Israelites gathering in Jerusalem to "rededicate" their Temple, but only enough Sacred Oil could be found to kindle for a single day the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light. Miraculously, while soldiers undertook the eight-day journey to bring new oil back from the Negev Desert, the flame of the *Ner Tamid* never faltered.

The story of the oil is not historical fact, while the victory of the tiny Maccabean army is. As we kindle Hanukkah's seven lights, we remind ourselves that the true miracles in our world appear when good people do the difficult work that brings about the changes that we, and those with whom we share this precious planet, need. We love our stories, but we give thanks for the real stories of those who keep the lights of life and kindness burning bright.

Lighting the Eighth Candle

Since the time of the Maccabees, the battle for religious freedom has been fought again and again across the globe. After each victory, grateful men, women and children have honored those who dedicated themselves to these great causes by keeping alive the remembrance of their struggle for the freedoms we enjoy today.

Tonight, we kindle eight lights to celebrate the flames of understanding, of respect, of acceptance, of thoughtfulness, of kindness, of fairness, of friendship and of love. As we complete this year's observance of Hanukkah, may we forever treasure the precious inheritance we have received from generations before us. May we seek to build a world in which every person – regardless of religion, political viewpoint, or any of ten thousand other ways that we can differ from one another – is welcomed in freedom and justice and peace.

– written by Rabbi Billy Dreskin

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b