

WHY WE DO? CHANUKAH

"Why We Do" is a new series on foundational Jewish knowledge, offering insights into the reasons behind our practices. Understanding these reasons brings purpose, meaning, and excitement to what we do.

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WHY WE DO - CHANUKAH

Why do we celebrate Chanukah?

During the period of the Second Bet Hamikdash, the Greek empire imposed harsh and oppressive decrees upon the Jewish people, aiming to obliterate their religious practices and identity. The Greeks, under the leadership of King Antiochus IV, sought to assimilate the Jewish population into Hellenistic culture, forbidding the study of the Torah and the observance of mitzvot (commandments). They desecrated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, defiling its sacred spaces and rendering the pure and holy vessels impure.

In the face of these atrocities, a small group of Jewish warriors known as the Chashmona'im (or Maccabees), led by Yehuda HaMaccabee and his brothers, rose in defiance. This courageous band waged a determined and inspired guerrilla warfare campaign against the vastly superior Greek forces, motivated by their unwavering faith and dedication to preserving their religious heritage.

On the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, the Chashmona'im achieved a remarkable and unlikely victory, reclaiming Jerusalem and purifying the Holy Temple. Upon entering the Temple, they found it in a state of desecration, with the sacred altar and many of the holy vessels defiled. Their most urgent task was to relight the Menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum that symbolized the presence of Hashem. However, their search for uncontaminated oil proved challenging.

After an exhaustive search, they discovered a single flask of pure olive oil, sealed with the unbroken seal of the Kohen HaGadol (High Priest). This oil was only enough to keep the Menorah burning for one day. Despite this, the Chashmona'im proceeded to light the Menorah, placing their trust in Hashem.

Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, long enough for them to press and prepare a fresh supply of pure oil.

To commemorate this miracle and the victory of the Chashmona'im, the Jewish people established the festival of Chanukah. For eight days, beginning on the 25th of Kislev, we light the menorah, adding an additional light each night to remember and publicize the miracle of the oil. The lighting of the menorah is accompanied by prayers of gratitude and songs of praise to Hashem, celebrating the triumph of light over darkness and purity over impurity.



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Why do we light the menorah?

We light the menorah to publicize the miracle of Chanukah, when a small jar of pure oil, enough to last only one day, burned for eight days in the Bet Hamikdash. This symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness, faith over despair, and the preservation of Jewish identity and values against assimilation. Lighting the menorah is an act of publicizing this miracle and a reminder to bring spiritual light and holiness into our lives and the world.

Why do we eat Latkes and Donuts on Chanukah?

We eat donuts (sufganiyot) on Chanukah to celebrate the miracle of the oil. These fried treats remind us of the small amount of oil that miraculously burned for eight days in the Temple menorah. Eating foods fried in oil, like sufganiyot and latkes, connects us to this theme and helps us honor the miracle in a delicious and festive way.

Why is there a minhag to eat dairy on Chanukah?

The custom to eat dairy on Chanukah is linked to the story of Yehudit (Judith) the daughter of the Kohen Gadol and the sister of Matisyahu, a courageous woman whose actions inspired Jewish resistance during a time of oppression. Yehudit served a powerful enemy general, Holofernes, salty cheese to make him thirsty and then gave him wine to quench his thirst. When he fell asleep, she killed him, leading to a Jewish victory. Eating dairy honors Yehudit's bravery and reminds us of the hidden miracles and strength that contributed to the Chanukah story.

Why do we play with dreidel on Chanukah?

Playing dreidel on Chanukah is a custom that dates back to times when Jewish learning was forbidden under oppressive greek rule. Jewish children would secretly study Torah, and if soldiers approached, they would quickly hide their books and pretend to be playing with spinning tops. The dreidel game symbolizes the perseverance of Jewish identity and the commitment to Torah study despite challenges. The letters on the dreidel—Nun, Gimel, Hei, and Shin—stand for the phrase Nes Gadol Haya Sham (A great miracle happened there). However, in Israel, the dreidel has a slight variation: the last letter is Pei instead of Shin, representing Nes Gadol Haya Po (A great miracle happened here), acknowledging that the miracle of Chanukah occurred in the Land of Israel.

Why do we give out *gelt* & chocolate coins on Chanukah?

Giving children chocolate coins on Chanukah is a modern adaptation of the custom of giving Chanukah gelt (money). Jewish children were given coins during Chanukah as a reward for their Torah learning and to encourage acts of generosity, such as giving to charity (tzedakah). This practice highlighted the value of education and kindness. The use of chocolate coins adds a festive and child-friendly twist to this tradition. The shiny, gold-foil-wrapped chocolates symbolize the original coins and serve as a sweet reminder of the joy, light, and giving spirit of the holiday.

