

## “A great miracle happened there” – on Chanukah, the Jewish “Festival of Lights”

A special celebration has been held for several years on one December evening in Szeroka Street, located in Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter of Kraków.

After the speeches of the invited guests (usually including the Mayor of Kraków, representatives of cultural institutions, and rabbis), a lamp is lit on a large eight-branch candelabrum called the Hanukkah Menorah. There is joyful atmosphere, the participants sing and dance, and then everyone is offered a donut.

This ceremony heralds the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Chanukah. It is a celebration commemorating the events that took place in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. At that time, the Jewish state was under the rule of the Greco-Syrian Seleucid dynasty. To some Jews, the Hellenic culture seemed so attractive that they started to adopt some of its customs. This, in turn, was met with opposition from others. The conflict was exacerbated during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The ruler issued a series of decrees intended to increase the Hellenisation of Jews, and he appointed supporters of these Greek spirit reforms of Judaism as priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. The most important rituals, customs, and practices of Judaism such as the celebration of the Sabbath, circumcision, or the teachings of Torah were forbidden. Statues of Greek gods were placed in the temple, and its altar was desecrated with offerings of pigs. Jews responded to these events with a revolt which was led by Mattathias of the Hasmonean dynasty and his five sons. After the death of Mattathias, his son Judah assumed command, and was given the nickname *Maccabee* (“Hammer”). Hence the insurgents came to be called the Maccabees.

Despite the fact that they were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the enemy, the uprising was a success. The Greeks were driven from Judea, and the Temple in Jerusalem was purified and reconsecrated. It became a place of worship of the Jewish God again.

This military victory in itself could have been a reason for the establishment of the holiday. However, the Talmud emphasises a certain event which was considered to be a miracle.

In order to consecrate the Temple, it was necessary to light a seven-branch oil lamp, which should burn without interruption. However, it turned out that only one jug of oil could be found among the stocks; it was an amount that was enough for one day, and it took eight days to press new oil. Nevertheless, the priests decided to light a menorah right away, even if this would have meant a possible break in the burning. Then it turned out that this small amount of oil burned for eight days continuously until the new oil was ready for use.

The celebration of Chanukah is full of symbols. Its duration – eight days – refers to the miracle from centuries ago. However, its most important elements are the lights lit on the eight-branch candelabra or oil lamp. On the first evening, one candle is lit, on the second – two lamps, on the third – three ... And finally, on the eighth day, all the candles on the Hanukkah Menorah burn. There is also one additional candle, the so-called *shamash*, used to light all the other candles. It is important that the lights should be burning in a visible place. This can be, for example, on a windowsill so that passers-by can see the lights from the street. Their purpose is “to propagate the miracle”, so visibility is important.

The lighting of candles is accompanied by blessings recited or sung in Hebrew. The translation into English of the first blessing is as follows: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light”. It is followed by another: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this time”. On the first evening, the third blessing is added: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion”.

The dishes are also symbolic. The most popular ones include *latkes*, or potato pancakes. *Latkes* can also be made from other vegetables; it is important to fry them in oil, which is a reminder of the miracle of the oil. In Israel, donuts are a favourite Chanukah delicacy.

Another essential element of the Chanukah holiday involves playing with the *dreidel*. It is a four-sided spinning top. Each side of the *dreidel* bears a letter of the Hebrew alphabet: *nun*, *gimel*, *hay* and *shin*.

These are the first letters of the words in the sentence: *Nes gadol hayah sham*, which means "a great miracle happened there." Each participant puts something into the pot and then spins the *dreidel*; then according to the letter that appears, the player can get everything from the pot, half of it, they must add to the pot or they may lose their turn. The game can be played with candies, peanuts, etc., but the most commonly used items are the special *chanuke-geld* – chocolate coins wrapped in golden paper. For obvious reasons, Israeli spinning tops differ from those used in other countries by one letter. The letter *shin* with which the word *sham* begins has been replaced in Israel by the letter *pei*, which is for *poh* – "here".

The origin of the custom of playing with a *dreidel* during Chanukah is variously interpreted. The most popular explanation is that at the time when it was forbidden to study the Torah and to celebrate the Sabbath, Jews had to do it in secret, and they had such spinning tops prepared in case they were uncovered so they could pretend that the purpose of the meeting was to play a gambling game. They are also gifts for children. It is a relatively new custom. However, the proximity of Christmas and its grand celebrations have affected the Chanukah customs, as well. And although this is a holiday of a relatively minor significance compared with the biblical festivals (such as *Pesach*, *Yom Kippur*, and others), due to the coincidence of dates, it is one of the most celebrated Jewish holidays, with parties, music, and elaborate home decorations.

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